SETTLING DAY

BY

NAT GOULD.

LONDON: R.A. EVERETT & Co.

Contractor to His Majesty's Government

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NAT GOULD

AUTHOR OF

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SETTLING DAY

CHAPTER I

THE LITTLE CHAP

HE was riding hard and fast, the thud of his horse's hoofs resounded from the sun-baked ground. He rode for a life, the life of his child, a little chap six years old. As he urged on his mare he fancied in every moan of the wind he heard a cry of pain. His face was set and his eyes were tearless, but his heart throbbed painfully, and each pulsation seemed to increase his dread of what might happen in the homestead during his absence. In the Australian bush doctors are few and far between, and many miles have to be covered before assistance in case of sickness can be obtained.

Jim Dennis's had not been a happy life. He was practically an outcast from society, a solitary man, living in a lonely spot in the wilds of New South Wales. He had been grievously wronged, and knew it, but others did not, and the world's judgment upon him had been harsh and unjust. He

hated the world, so he said, and thought he meant, it; but there was one connecting link with the past that softened his heart, and that was the little chap who lay fighting for life while he rode at a mad pace to fetch aid so necessary to save him; and the mare, with that unerring instinct which horses possess, knew she was set no ordinary task. The sun was glowing down upon man and beast, and the ground felt like hot bricks. There was no grass, for the wretched substitute in the dried shrivelled blades that nodded faintly in the wind could scarcely be designated as such.

No trees afforded a cool shade, and a stagnant water-hole or two was no temptation to drink.

Jim Dennis had several miles to go before he reached Swamp Creek, the nearest township to his lonely station.

He urged the mare on, and faster and faster she went, taxing her strength to the uttermost, and yet never faltering, her courage still high, her spirit undaunted. Her nostrils were extended and fiery red, a few faint traces of foam were on the bit, but her mouth was dry and parched as the ground she galloped over.

Her breath came in short, quick sobs, and Jim Dennis knew she would be well-nigh spent in another hour. He was not a cruel man, and he had great affection for all animals. It was mankind that he warred against, not the brute creation.

'Poor old lass,' he murmured as he patted her hot neck. 'Poor old Bess. This is a hard day's work for you old girl ; but don't think me cruel. You must save his life—my little chap's life. He's dying, Bess. Do you hear—? he's dying!' He almost shouted the last words in a long wail of agony.

The mare pricked her ears at the sound, and, noble beast that she was, stretched out in a final effort.

She almost flew over the ground and even Jim Dennis, who knew her so well, was surprised.

'She knows,' he thought. 'Good old Bess! She's never gone like this before.'

There was a singing in his ears, and a monotonous, wailing cry hovered around him.

If the little chap died he knew there was nothing left for him to live for. That small life breathed hope into him, and if it were extinguished the last flicker would go out of his heart.

In the far distance he saw a small cluster of houses, shanties would perhaps be the proper word. It was the dim outline of Swamp Creek, a miserable little place, but to Jim it seemed a haven of rest and hope.

The local doctor was a curious compound of self-conceit and good nature. He had been a ship's surgeon for many years, and if he was somewhat addicted to drink, no better hearted fellow could be found for a hundred miles round.

He was stranded in Sydney, but through the aid of a brother medico of repute he managed to establish himself at Swamp Creek, where in his bachelor state he eked out an existence.

Dr Thomas Sheridan, or, as he was familiarly known in Swamp Creek district, Dr Tom, was simply idolised by the inhabitants, and this adoration was not undeserved, for it often stood in lieu of medical fees.

Dr Tom, even when in his cups, was never known to refuse to undertake any journey, no matter how far, or in what weather, or how remote the chance of payment.

Although he did not look it, Dr Tom was by no means unskilful, and he had an iron nerve which no amount of bad, fiery liquor, could shake.

It was to Dr Tom that Jim Dennis was riding, and he felt every confidence in his being able to pull the little chap through if he could only get him there in time.

That was the all-important question: Would Dr Tom arrive in time?

Nearer and nearer the mare galloped towards the township, and the doctor, whose house stood at the edge of the village, saw them coming.

He was in a good humour. That morning he had completed a difficult operation to his entire satisfaction, although the patient had alluded to him as a 'blundering old idiot,' and wondered why such men were permitted to 'adorn' the medical profession.

Dr Tom was used to strong language, Swamp Creek was famous for it, in fact the Creek had almost a language of its own. The atmosphere probably had something to do with the warmth of the expressions used by the inhabitants.

Dr Tom looked at the mare and her rider, and said to himself:

'That's Jim Dennis. Wonder what the devil he's up to, tearing about the country like a madman in this heat. He's on a "jag," I guess. Well, he'll get no assistance here, I can do with all the "jag mixture" myself.'

Jim Dennis pulled the exhausted mare up with a jerk, and, springing out of the saddle, rushed up the steps of the doctor's house.

'He's dying, Dr Tom, the little chap's dying. Come at once. For God's sake man hurry! We haven't a moment to lose. You must save him. You can save him. You *will* save him! He's all I have in the world.'

'What, little Willie!' exclaimed Dr Tom. 'What's got hold of him?'

'Fever, or something. He's raving. Don't stand talking. Hurry up! Get out your buggy and horses. Never mind if you drive 'em to death. I'll pay for 'em. Only get there in time.'

'I'll be ready in a crack, Jim,' said Dr Tom, as he went inside, and, in a very short space of time, the buggy, with a decent pair of horses hitched to it, was at the door.

'Leave your mare here, she's dead beat,' said Dr Tom.

Away they went at full gallop, and as the doctor's buggy dashed out of the township, people looked after it and thought it must be a desperate case for him to drive his cattle at such a pace.

'Keep calm, man; keep calm, or you'll be ill yourself,' said Dr Tom.

'I can't do it, doc, the little chap may be dead,' and Jim Dennis groaned.

'Cheer up, mate, you never know what a youngster can pull through; they'll beat a man hollow. Many's the child I have seen live when a man would have died,' said Dr Tom.

There was a gleam of hope in Jim Dennis's eyes, but it quickly faded, and he said,—

'Bad luck has dogged me all my life. There's a curse upon me, and now it's fallen on the little chap.'

Dr Tom looked at him. He did not know the history of this man's life but he guessed some of it. He was a shrewd judge of character, and in his heart he believed that Jim Dennis was more sinned against than sinning. He had heard strange stories of this lonely man, and he had more than once had a stand-up fight on his account. He liked Jim more than anyone about Swamp Creek, and he was very fond of the little chap, as Willie was called.

He meant to save the child if possible, and he had fought many a fight with grim Death and beaten

him. Nothing gave Dr Tom more satisfaction than to rescue a patient from danger. It was not so much that he loved his profession as that he desired to overcome obstacles.

'Get up!' said the doctor, and laid the lash across the backs of his horses. 'It will ruin my pair, but I don't mind that. They are not accustomed to this pace.'

'You can take the best pair I have,' said Jim.

'I know that. You are not like the bulk of my patients. Cross words is the most I get from some of them,' said the doctor.

Jim Dennis smiled faintly. He knew Dr Tom did not exaggerate.

The buggy swayed from side to side and bumped up and down in a manner suggestive of an early turn over.

It was a rough country and there was only a track, made by the mail coach, which ran past Jim Dennis's place twice a week.

The doctor's buggy, however, was made to bear plenty of wear and tear, and, although it looked anything but elegant, it could stand a lot of knocking about. The last time it had been washed the Swamp Creek folk were so surprised that they turned out *en masse* to look at the unfamiliar operation. Dr Tom, who said he disliked publicity, had not since repeated the operation. The harness had several suspicions of bits of rope about it, and the horses were accustomed to do most of their

own grooming by rolling in the stable yard. Altogether the turnout was not one to inspire confidence, but it was, nevertheless, a welcome sight to many a sufferer round Swamp Creek.

'We'll be there soon, Jim. Cheer up, old man. Don't let the little chap see you with a downcast face. Whom have you left with him?'

'Sal!'

'What! the half-caste?'

'Yes. She's a good sort.'

'Humph!' said the doctor.

'Who else could I leave?'

'No one, of course,' and Dr Tom applied the whip vigorously.

A cloud of dust rose around the buggy and they came to a stop; the sudden jerk nearly threw them out.

One of the horses was down. With a muttered curse, Jim Dennis jumped out and urged the animal to rise. The tired horse struggled to his feet and, as Jim sprang into the buggy, moved on again.

'Dead beat,' said Dr Tom; 'but he'll last to your place.'

In half an hour they saw Dennis's homestead in the distance, and again the lash came down on the horses' backs, wielded by Dr Tom's vigorous arm.

It was a moment of terrible suspense to Jim Dennis when the buggy pulled up, and Dr Tom, springing out with more activity than might have been expected, hurried into the cottage.

Jim was almost afraid to follow him.

If the little chap was dead he felt he could not bear the blow.

The minute or two he stood outside waiting seemed an eternity.

Then came a relief that was well-nigh as insupportable. It was Dr Tom who called out,—

'Come in, Jim, the little chap's alive. I'll pull him through. He's not so bad after all.'

'Thank God!' said Jim Dennis, whose prayers had been few and far between.

CHAPTER II

BLACK SAL

JIM DENNIS'S homestead was anything but an enticing place. He had built the bulk of it himself, and said it was good enough. The boards were fairly weather-beaten and the galvanised iron roof was torn at the ends by wind and rain. A small verandah in front was reached by five rickety steps, and some of the piles on which the house was built afforded a fine refuge for white ants. These insects were so industrious that one stump was a crumbling mass, so laboriously had it been honeycombed.

Around the homestead was the stable yard, a dull, dreary-looking place, consisting of two or three sheds hurriedly run up, a heap of refuse, a dirty old dog kennel, home made, a sheep pen, and a few etceteras, that men who have known such places will imagine.

For all that, however, Jim Dennis had a fair station. He had purchased it in the rough from the Government and obtained it on easy terms. All payments had been kept up and the land was his own.

Jim Dennis was never known to repudiate debts. His name was 'good' with the storekeepers for miles

round, but he was more feared than respected. No one seemed able to understand him. He had an inscrutable face, and was seldom seen to smile except when the little chap was with him.

'He's a bad lot,' was the Swamp Creek opinion.

'And let me tell you, you "bounders,"' said Dr Tom, 'that half of you are not fit to black Jim Dennis's boots.'

'He never has 'em blacked, doc.'

'Then you're not fit to scrape the dirt off 'em, never mind the blacking,' was the retort.

Inside Wanabeen, the name of Jim's place, the little chap lay gasping on a camp bedstead, with the half-caste Sal crooning near him.

Sal was not so black as the aborigine, and had been brought up on a mission station. She was not a bad-looking woman, about four or five-and-twenty.

How came she there?

It happened in this wise. Sal was the offspring of a rich squatter. Her only disgrace was her birth, not to her, but to the man who begot her. She lived with the blacks on the station for several years. She grew up in wild, unrestricted freedom. She was lithe and active as any young black on the run, and her fleetness of foot had more than once stood her in good stead.

Sal had dark brown liquid eyes, a nose somewhat too large for her face, but not unprepossessing, full cheeks, a forehead well set on, small ears, thickish lips, and a mass of dark curly hair that never seemed to be

out of order. She had small hands and small feet, and her supple limbs were graceful.

When the 'boss' of the station went to England to spend the money others had made for him, Sal was annexed by the mission people.

Not that these good folk meant any harm, quite the contrary, they took the girl for the good of her health and her soul.

It so happened that Sal did not know the meaning of the word soul, but it was explained to her. She thought it curious that a certain portion of her body when she died would go to regions far away. If she happened to be good her soul would revel above the blue sky in unrestricted freedom for evermore; if she by any chance turned out badly—well, there was another place where her soul would suffer torments suitable to her misdeeds.

Sal argued this matter out with herself, and commenced to take observations. She saw much in the conduct of her preceptors which caused her to wonder whether their souls were destined for the blue skies or the other place.

Having white blood in her veins, Sal had an imagination far beyond her dull, thick-skulled people. She had a mind and a will of her own. The former suggested to her that she ought to run away from the mission, and the latter carried it out. In a word, Sal 'bolted.'

For several years she wandered about with the members of her own tribe, loathing the savage,

uncouth part of their nature, yet loving the liberty they enjoyed. She was a curious mixture, a compound of black and white, a study in unharmonies. Half tame, half wild, reasoning yet unreasoning, knowing good from bad, yet undecided on which side lay happiness. The chief of her tribe, King Charlie, who had dreamt the dream and seen the vision of the 'Spirit of the Lilies' and of the bursting of the cloud that turned the great western plain into a lake, understood her.

He protected her and saved her from danger.

King Charlie had a metal plate suspended from his neck, which covered his hard, black, hairy chest —in the shape of a half moon—and on this plate was written the 'order of the garter' of his tribe. King Charlie loved Sal, and she ruled him, as women have ruled those who love them since the day that Adam fell.

There came a time, when the land was parched and food was scarce, when the wandering camp split up and some went one way, some another.

Sal found a resting place at Wanabeen. She crawled, half dead, to the foot of the steps of Jim Dennis's homestead, and, panting, lay down to die.

She stretched out her scantily-clothed limbs and pillowed her black curly head on her shrunken arms.

She commenced to think about her soul and wonder when it would leave her body, and whether it would soar to that bright blue, hot, pitiless sky

above. Then she fell asleep, and when Jim Dennis came out of his cottage with the little chap in his arms he stumbled over her.

Jim Dennis did not curse or swear or tell this outcast to 'get out.'

He put the little chap down, who was then three years old, and picked up the sleeping woman. He carried her on to the verandah—he was a big, powerful fellow—and then he went inside, dragged out his own mattress and put her on to it.

The little chap watched him with wondering eyes, and commenced to make three-year-old remarks, such as 'Who's that, daddy? Pitty woman. Whoo's seepy, daddy,' and so on.

Jim Dennis brought water and moistened her lips. Then he stood watching her.

Sal slept right through the night, and when she came round in the morning she saw Jim Dennis before her with the child in his arms. She rubbed her eyes and looked at them. Then she explained what had happened, and Jim said,—

'You can stay here and look after the little chap. Will you?'

Her big brown eyes glistened, and, weak as she was she stretched out her hands for the child.

Jim put him down, and, after a moment's hesitation, he toddled towards her.

From that day, three years ago, black Sal had been devoted to the little boy. In her wild, half-tamed way she loved him more than anything on earth.

It was Sal who sat at the child's bedside when Jim Dennis rode out to Swamp Creek for Dr Tom. The woman watched every movement of the little face, every quiver of the body. Each moan from his lips pierced her like a knife. The child was not her own, and yet she loved him, and worshipped with a dog-like devotion the big man who was his father.

Sal would willingly have submitted to any torture could she by so doing have saved the child a moment's pain.

During the long weary hours when Jim Dennis was absent she felt as though something in her body must snap.

Then she heard, with her keen ears, the low, dull thud of the horses' hoofs, and she knew they were coming, and that help was at hand. She did not leave the bedside to look out, she would not have done that for worlds. When Dr Tom came into the room she gave a gasp, and watched him as he looked at the child. She saw hope in his face and caught his hand.

Dr Tom pressed it and said,—

'Come in, Jim, the little chap's alive. I'll pull him through. It's not so bad after all.'

All that night Dr Tom fought for the child's life, and the dark woman and Jim Dennis looked on in silent agony.

With the first streaks of dawn a change came over the child. It was as though the coming day had ushered in new life and hope.

For two days Dr Tom remained at Wanabeen, and at the end of that time the boy's life was out of danger.

The tension relapsed, Jim Dennis said,—

'I have a lot to thank you for, doctor. You have saved him, and he is dearer to me than my own life. I shall never forget it. There may come a time when I can be of service to you, and then you must not be afraid to ask what you will of Jim Dennis.'

Dr Tom was not a sentimental man, but even his hard, rough-used nature felt the delicacy of the situation.

'It has given me more pleasure to save that child's life than I ever experienced before. Jim Dennis, you're a brick.'

Jim smiled as he replied, 'Swamp Creek thinks I'm a shocking bad lot.'

'Then Swamp Creek can go to—'

'Hold hard, doc.'

'Let 'em say anything against you in my presence, that's all,' said Dr Tom.

'You are quite sure he is out of danger?' asked Jim.

'Certain. I'll leave all the necessary medicine and tell Sal what to do. She's like a mother to him.'

A dark cloud gathered on Jim Dennis's face, and Dr Tom saw it.

'Jim, my man, where is the lad's mother?'

'Wait and I'll tell you on—' he hesitated.

'On!—when?' asked Dr Tom.

'Settling Day,' said Jim.

CHAPTER III

POTTER'S SHANTY

DR TOM remained for three days at Wanabeen.

'If there's anyone ill they know where to find me,' he said.

'They'll never come to Wanabeen for you. There's a bad name about this place,' Jim replied.

'Who's given it?'

'The police, and well—you know—others.'

'Why?'

Jim Dennis shrugged his shoulders. It was an expressive gesture, it meant so much to a man who understood him.

'You are one of the old gang, they tell me, Jim—is that true?'

'What do you mean by the old gang?'

'One of the men who stuck the beggars all up at Potter's Shanty when the coach was stopped,' said Dr Tom.

'They say that—do they?'

'Yes.'

'Then let it rest. I was there that night.'

'Were you in it, Jim?—no halves.'

'No, doc, I was not in it in the sense you mean.'

'Who put it up?'

The question was a simple one, but Jim Dennis turned round like a lion at bay, and said,—

'You—you—dare ask *me* that?'

Dr Tom felt uncomfortable.

'I don't want you to give a pal away,' he said.

Jim Dennis strode over to him and took his arm. The pressure was painful and Dr Tom winced.

'This is not an amputation case,' he said.

Jim Dennis dropped his arm and said quietly,—

'Forgive me, doc; but don't you really know the fact of that matter?'

'No, on my honour.'

'Then I am the last man to tell you.'

Dr Tom sighed and glanced out of his eyes at Jim.

That 'sticking up' case at Potter's Shanty had puzzled more than one clever man.

Now the little chap has pulled through, and death is not knocking at his door, it may be as well to relate the incident.

Potter's Shanty was a public-house, a wayside hotel, a dispensary for every kind of infernal liquor, bad and indifferent—there was no good.

The mail coach stopped at Potter's, and it was reported to the police that sometimes the mails

stopped there also. Potter's was a curious old place, and lay, or, to be more correct, tried to stand, between Swamp Creek and Wanabeen. Old Potter was a relic of bygone days. He had been mixed up with the Kelly gang over the border, and at various times a hospitable Government had entertained him without his sanction.

Old Potter was a trifle of a moralist in his way. He could neither read or write; so on one occasion when he was accused of forgery he brought forward unimpeachable evidence in his favour.

The Crown had produced a mass of evidence which proved up to the hilt that old Potter was an unmitigated thief, but the prosecution went too far, as prosecutions occasionally do, and proved too much. It was sworn on oath (Potter was particular about oaths) that old Samuel Potter had forged a signature to a bill.

'What's a bill?' asked Samuel.

The Court tittered. There were a few remarks made as to Samuel Potter's blissful ignorance.

'Do you mean to tell me you don't know what a bill is?' asked the Crown prosecutor.

'Well, that depends,' said Potter.

'What depends? Depends on what? Answer me that, sir!' thundered the irate man with the flowing wig.

'Well, it's this way, you see. If you stayed at my shanty and ran up a score, which you didn't pay, and I asked you for the amount, I'd call that a bill.'

The learned gentleman pulled his black cloak furiously and said,—

'If I owed you a bill I would pay it, provided you presented it in due form.'

'That's what I couldn't do, your worship,' said Potter.

'Why?' asked the judge.

'Because I can't read or write.'

The judge put on his spectacles, which had been reposing on his note-book, and said, as he eyed the Crown prosecutor with severity,—

'I understood this man was charged with forgery.'

The Crown prosecutor blinked, and eventually Samuel Potter was discharged.

Although it was perfectly true that Potter could neither read or write, he was a shrewd man, and his shanty had been the scene of many an illegal transaction.

Swamp Creek folk had a wholesome dread of Potter's, and the solitary mounted constable in the place knew it was wise for him to 'keep in' with old Sam.

The police magistrate for the district was also aware that Potter's Shanty was a house of ill repute, but what could he do, he was one against many?

The incident alluded to by Dr Tom was exciting enough in its way.

Ned Glenn, the driver of the coach, pulled up as usual at Potter's to refresh his horses, five of them, fairly good animals. The passengers also

endeavoured to cool their parched throats, but old Sam was one too many for them. His liquors were strong and 'home made,' and so the passengers discovered.

It so happened that on this journey the young manager of the Swamp Creek branch of the Nation's Bank was on his way to the headquarters for the Western District at Bourke. He carried with him a considerable sum of money, much in gold, more in notes.

It was his way of doing it. He thought that by not giving notice of the fact, publicity would be avoided, and that he might escape observation. Thirty or forty years ago things were very different in Australia to what they are now, and coaches were run in districts where the trains may now be seen daily.

Jim Dennis was at Potter's Shanty the night the coach stopped and the manager of the Nation's Bank was robbed.

A month after the robbery he cashed a note for five pounds in the Swamp Creek Hotel, and this same note was proved to have been in the possession of the manager of the Nation's Bank on the day of the robbery at Potter's. There was no direct evidence to prove Jim Dennis had any hand in the business, but in those days suspicion once fastened on to a man was difficult to get rid of. The majority of the people in the district believed Jim Dennis had a hand in the robbery, in fact was the instigator of it, and Sam Potter encouraged the impression.

Between Potter and Jim Dennis a continual war had been waged ever since, and, what made matters worse, Ned Glenn, the coach driver, sided with the owner of Wanabeen. Ned Glenn was no fool. He had driven the coach between Swamp Creek and Bourke for several years. He knew every inch of the road, or, to be more correct, the track, and no man could frighten a box-seat passenger out of his senses better than Ned. He was a weather-beaten old fellow, with a face like cracked parchment, merry little twinkling eyes that were suggestive of unlimited fun and roguery.

Ned Glenn was a character. He had figured, even in those early days, as a prominent man—a full page all to himself—in the *Sydney Lantern*. In this remarkable sheet Ned Glenn was depicted as a kind of Claude Duval on the box seat of his coach. Passengers were notified to 'beware of the driver,' and Ned's pockets were bulging out with stolen notes and various articles of attire alleged to have been the property of his passengers.

Ned was advised by the local lawyer at Swamp Creek that he had a good action against the paper and would recover heavy damages.

'And who'll get 'em?' said Ned.

'You will,' replied the lawyer.

'And what about your share?' asked Ned.

'I shall expect some recompense,' said the legal luminary.

Ned winked his near side eye and thought they

had better let the matter slide. To tell the honest truth, Ned Glenn was rather proud of figuring in the *Lantern*. He had seen the Premier occupying the front page, also the Governor, and even if reflections were cast upon his character by the sketch, it was good to be in such company.

'And the hartist's signed his name to it,' said Ned, proudly, as he produced the crumpled up journal for the benefit of the 'bagman,' who occupied the box seat. Ned Glenn was a thick-and-thin supporter of Jim Dennis and Dr Tom, not to mention the little chap, and Sal. If the whole of the members of the ministry had been on his coach, Ned would have pulled up at Wanabeen.

It so came about that the night Dr Tom was to leave Wanabeen Ned's coach was due.

The doctor and Jim Dennis were standing on the verandah, and saw him tooling his team along at a shambling gallop.

'Funny thing we should be talking about that affair at Potter's,' said the doctor. 'Here's Ned's coach.'

'He'll pull up here, he always does,' said Jim. 'I'll go and get him a drink ready. I feel quite light-hearted now the little chap is better—thanks to you, doc.'

Jim Dennis passed inside, and before he came out again Ned Glenn had pulled up his horses in front of the homestead.

There were no passengers ; he merely had the mail and some luggage.

'Hullo, doctor, what are you doing here?' sang out Ned in his cheery voice.

'Jim's youngster has been very ill. I've been here these three days.

'Eh, Gad! What! the little chap?' exclaimed Ned, as he scrambled down.

'Yes, the little chap; but he's out of danger now,' said the doctor.

'Where's Jim?'

'Gone inside to get you a drink.'

Ned Glenn left the mails, the coach and the horses to look after themselves. His old-fashioned figure glided round the side of the homestead, and when he saw Jim Dennis he said,—

'He's all right, eh, Jim? We can't afford to lose him. There never was such a child.'

'Yes, Ned, he's safe, thanks to Dr Tom; but he's had a tough time of it.'

'And pulled through,' said Ned. 'I hope I'll live to see him on the back of a cup winner for his dad before I peg out.'

CHAPTER IV

JIM'S TROUBLE

LEFT alone with his son, Jim Dennis watched him tenderly, and Sal looked keenly at him, with dog-like devotion gleaming out of her deep, dull, liquid eyes.

She understood what the life of this child meant to the man who had been kind to her when all others had deserted her. Her heart bled for him in his trouble, and she would willingly have given her life to spare him pain.

Jim Dennis gazed long at the child's now peaceful face. As his little head lay pillowed in peaceful slumber on one arm, the features of the sleeping boy recalled many memories.

It brought back thoughts of a woman he had loved and married, and who left him when Willie Dennis was but an infant. It was a cruel, heartless blow she struck him, and he meant some day to 'settle' an account with the man who had robbed him.

It was the old story. The life at Wanabeen was lonely and Maud Dennis was city bred. Jim Dennis had deceived her in nothing when he married her. He told her of the solitary life he led, and painted

his home in anything but glowing colours. He would rather have risked losing her than deceive her.

Maud fancied she loved him, probably she did then, and said life with him would be worth living anywhere. Jim Dennis believed her, married her and took her home to Wanabeen.

For a time all went well. Then the loneliness commenced to tell upon her somewhat frivolous nature. She pined for the city, the pleasures of Sydney life, the shops, the gaiety, the dances and picnics, the admiration of men and the thousand and one other attractions that are all in all to some women. Jim Dennis saw she felt lonely and it troubled him. He was absent on the station the greater part of the day, it could not be otherwise in his life. He thought when the child was born it would cheer her and render her life more tolerable.

He was grievously mistaken. Maud was not a woman to make a devoted mother. She was too selfish, and little Willie was rather a 'bore' to her.

With a great trouble at his heart, Jim Dennis saw this, and he felt he must do something to relieve the strain. He asked her if she would like to go to Sydney for a few months for a change. Maud was delighted at the prospect, but asked, much to her husband's astonishment, what would become of the child.

'Take him with you,' said Jim. 'You cannot leave him here.'

'Surely you can find someone to mind him. I shall not be able to enjoy myself in Sydney if he is there,' was her unfeeling reply.

Jim Dennis was a man of few words.

'Leave him with me. I will take care of him,' he said, as he took the little chap in his arms and kissed him.

'I am sure you will manage all right, Jim,' she said; 'and he will be far better here than in Sydney. It is a trying journey, and the coach is such an uncomfortable one. Yes, he will be far better here.'

So Willie remained at Wanabeen, and his mother went to Sydney. It was with a sad heart, and a feeling of bitter disappointment, that Jim Dennis watched her wave her hand in farewell from the box seat of Ned Glenn's coach.

He stood on the verandah with the child in his arms, and remained there until it was out of sight. He saw her talking gaily to Ned, and she did not look back after that one farewell.

A presentiment of coming evil oppressed him. Ought he to have allowed her to go? that was the burden of his thoughts. He hardly knew what he feared. She was his wife, and he trusted her; then what harm could come of it?

He had never seen her from that day, but her face and form came vividly to mind as he looked at his child.

He received letters from her during the first month of her stay in Sydney. He was pleased with them. She was happy, the change was doing her an immense amount of good. She inquired lovingly after him and the child. As the month wore on her letters became shorter, and excuses were made that she had so much to do, and such a short time to do it in, that she must make the most of it, and so on.

In the last letter he received no mention was made of Willie, and he felt it keenly.

Then there was an interval of suspense. He waited a fortnight and no letter arrived. He could stand it no longer, and he wrote to her father asking how it was he had not heard from Maud. Was she ill? Then came the reply that seemed for days and weeks to blot out his life, and he wandered about in an aimless, half-dazed way, heedless where he went, not knowing what he was doing.

'Maud left home to return to Wanabeen a week ago,' wrote her father. 'What can have happened?'

Jim Dennis knew what had happened. His heart told him that she had left him and deserted her child. He did not answer the letter, and another came.

Maud's father wrote to say his daughter was a disgrace to her family. He heard she had gone to England, but he did not know with whom. He advised him to think of her as dead and cast her memory out of his life, as he meant to do.

'She is not worth a thought from such a man as you, Jim Dennis. You are worth a hundred times

more than she is. I am sorry for you, very sorry. Can we help you at all with the little one? If so, please say in what way. I wish to heaven she had never been born to bring this disgrace upon us all.'

Jim Dennis wanted no help, and wrote to that effect. 'I will find her out, and the man who has ruined our lives, and then there will be a heavy settling day between us. As for blotting her out of my memory, I cannot do that yet, but the day may come when it will be done. If ever such a day arrives, there will be no mercy for the man or the woman—at present I have some for her.'

It took him a long time to write this letter. He was not much of a hand at letter writing, and his thoughts did not flow freely. Living his lonely life, he did not hear for a long time the story his wife had circulated in Sydney.

She had not only deserted him, but she had cast aspersions upon his character. She had blackened his name and accused him of many sins. To hide her own shame she threw blame for it upon him. Nay, she even went so far as to repudiate her own son, and say he was not her child. No outrage to the feelings of such a man as Jim Dennis could have been worse. He heard faint rumours of such things, but he refused to believe them. However, the truth was forced home to him by a friend from Sydney, who thought it better he should know the facts and try to refute them.

But Jim Dennis refused to do so. He bore his

second blow as he did the first, in silence, but he brooded long and deep over his wrongs. He hardened his heart and cursed the mother of his child.

He clenched his hands and swore a solemn oath the child should never hear its mother's name. Nay, more, he would, if necessary, uphold what his wife had said, and make Willie think he had another mother who was dead.

At all events, the lad should never learn, if he could possibly guard it from him, of the disgrace that had been put upon them both. Time had softened the blow to Jim Dennis, but had not healed it, and he was thinking of the bitter past as he sat by the bedside of his son.

Then old Ned Glenn's words occurred to him.

'What was he to make of the boy?'

Time enough for that, but still it had to be thought about. He had often mapped out an imaginary career for the little chap, but had never been able to satisfy himself the conclusions he had arrived at were for the best.

Ned Glenn's remark:

'I hope I'll live to see him on the back of a cup winner for his dad,' had sent off his thoughts in another direction.

Jim Dennis was a splendid horseman, no man in the wild district in which he lived could compare with him.

He had broken-in the most obstinate of buck-

jumpers and took a delight in mastering their stubborn natures. If a neighbour had a particularly savage, untameable animal, he would send to him and ask him if he could 'make the brute manageable.'

Nothing suited Jim better. He did not think it a trouble, but a pleasure, and regarded it more as conferring a favour upon himself than the other way about.

He would ride miles to lend a hand at this 'amusement,' as he called it, and thought he risked neither life nor limb by undertaking the task.

'You are the rummiest fellow I ever knew,' said Dr Tom to him. 'You never charge anything for your trouble, and, bless me, if you don't seem to regard risking your neck as legitimate sport.'

'Is there anything I can do for you in the breaking-in line?' Jim asked with a smile.

'Yes, there is. I have bought a brute that licks creation,' said the doctor.

'Ah!' said Jim, expressively. 'Didn't try him before buying?'

'No, not much.'

'How long was the price?'

'Only a fiver.'

'You cannot expect much for that.'

'But I got more than I bargained for. The seller said he was quiet enough,' said the doctor.

'Have you had him in the buggy?'

'Can't get him to look at the vehicle, and he has kicked down a portion of the stable already.'

'It wouldn't take long to kick the lot down,' laughed Jim.

'Don't abuse my property, or the next time you are ill I shall decline to attend you.'

'You mean the first time I am ill. I have never troubled you for any medicine yet,' said Jim.

'Only for whisky,' said the doctor, with a twinkle in his eyes.

'How about this horse? Must I tackle him for you?' asked Jim, changing the subject.

'If you will be so obliging.'

Jim Dennis took the doctor's steed in hand, and in the course of a severe tussle, extending over several hours, completely cowed him.

To such a man as Jim Dennis the thought of his son being a jockey came natural. With a critical eye he looked him over and thought, 'He is just cut out for it. He'll never be a heavy weight and he's the exact shape.

'He'll have to pretty well live in the saddle here,' thought Jim; 'and he may as well make the most of his skill if he has any in that direction.'

The lad turned over and, opening his eyes, looked into his father's face.

'Do you feel better now, Willie?' he asked tenderly.

'Yes, dad, all the pain has gone.'

Sal put her hand on his head and smoothed back his hair. 'You will soon be well, Willie,' she said.

'Does Dr Tom say so?'

'Yes,' answered his father.

'I'm so glad, dad. I want to be a big man and help you. There's no one to look after you but Sal and me. We'll take care of you. I mean to be as good a rider as you are.'

'That's right. I hope you will be even better.'

'I could not be better, because you are the best.'

'You must rest now, and keep quiet. Give him his medicine, Sal.'

The woman measured out the dose and placed the glass to his lips.

'That's not nasty. I like it,' he said.

A low, rumbling sound was heard. 'We are going to have rain,' said Jim, and his face brightened, for they were sorely in need of it.

'That will do good, dad.'

'Yes, and cool the air for you. You are not frightened at storms, are you?'

'No, not when you are here. I'm never frightened at anything when you are near me.'

It was a great consolation in Jim Dennis's life when he heard his child speak like this. He almost forgave the mother for deserting them, because it left Willie entirely for himself.

The only thing he was selfish in was the love of his son, and he could not bear that to be shared with anyone.

CHAPTER V

A REGULAR SAVAGE

FOR days and weeks there had been no rain at Wanabeen or in the Swamp Creek district. Jim Dennis was not a rich man, far from it, and he had to depend upon his small station for his living. Everything depended upon the weather. Without rain the land became a mere barren waste, and the stock perished. There were no artesian bores then, no artificial or scientific means of drawing supplies of water from under the ground, although Jim had a shrewd suspicion, from observations he had made, that underground rivers existed. He wished such rivers above instead of beneath the surface, or that he could find some means to tap them.

Owing to his boy's illness he had not been on his run for several days, quite an unusual occurrence with him. He could not leave the lad while in danger. He would have lost everything sooner than do so. But now he was on the high road to recovery, he went about his ordinary duties as usual.

The low rumbling still continued, and he went outside the house to look at the sky and watch the

signs of the approach of the welcome storm. In the distance he saw black masses of clouds, but they were a long way off, and he was fearful that, after all, the storm might not reach Wanabeen.

The cattle and horses already recognised the coming rain, and sniffed the air and looked around with eager anticipation.

'I'll saddle up and have a look round,' he said to himself. 'Willie will be all right.'

He stepped inside and found his son asleep. He beckoned to Sal and told her to look after him and that he would not be long gone.

He saddled his horse, a fine bay about six years old, and one he had bred himself. There was a certain amount of comradeship between Jim Dennis and his horses. They seemed to understand him as well as he did them. He rode out at the gate and went in the direction of the storm.

It was with a glad heart he heard the rumbling of the thunder, and from the various signs around him he knew the rain was near at hand. As far as he could see there was a peculiar haze in the atmosphere, dense, like falling rain.

The brown, bare earth, with here and there a scanty tuft of green, seemed to lie gasping for water. Big cracks appeared in the ground where it had been unable to stand the constant baking any longer, and so had given way. The trees were gaunt and well-nigh leafless.

He rode along keeping his eyes fixed on the clouds ahead. With surprising suddenness he felt a cool breeze commence to blow. It fanned his face and refreshed him, and his horse snorted and tossed his head as though he would say, 'This is a pleasant change. There will be a chance of a good feed soon.'

He reined in and waited; there was no occasion to ride on, for the storm was coming towards him fast. It was a thing to be welcomed, not avoided.

A few drops of rain fell, and he turned round to ride home. He had gone out to greet it and give it the welcome due to such a guest.

A dozen horses came galloping towards him, and he saw one of them was a strange animal and did not belong to him.

Jim Dennis knew there were lawless characters in the district who would be only too glad to get him into trouble. He was a straight goer and would have nothing to do with them, although he was credited with being hand and glove with the gang. The mounted police, too, had a 'down' on Jim, with one exception, Constable Doonan, who was his staunch friend. It was over the sticking up of the mail at Potter's Shanty and the robbery of the bank agent, that the police were strong against him. At that time Doonan was not in the district, but he had heard all about it, and when he came to know Jim Dennis he refused to believe he had a hand in it.

Sergeant Machinson, however, and the men who were engaged with him in investigating the robbery, wished to lay the blame upon Jim Dennis, and they, no doubt, honestly thought him the guilty party, or one of it.

Jim, however, was too many for them, and, managed to keep out of their clutches.

Sergeant Machinson had been called over the coals for not capturing the thieves, and he was wroth over the affair accordingly.

'That fellow Dennis was at the bottom of it, I'll be sworn,' he said to the other constables; 'or how did he come by the five-pound note? We must have him yet, my lads, but he'll take some catching. He's a smart fellow, but those very clever men often do some foolish act and it gives them away.'

As the bad characters in any district generally know what is going on, they soon discovered Sergeant Machinson and the bulk of his men had a 'set' against Jim Dennis. This helped them considerably in their dealings with the owner of Wanabeen.

Fortunately, however, for Jim Dennis, Constable Doonan was stationed at Swamp Creek, and looked after the district around Wanabeen.

Sergeant Machinson was quartered at Barragong, about ten miles away, and was in charge of a large tract of country. He had several men under him, amongst them Doonan. He would have removed Doonan elsewhere, as he knew he was partial to

Jim Dennis, but had no ostensible reason for such a step.

When Jim Dennis saw the strange horse running with his own, his first thought was that some evil-disposed person had put it on his run in order to get him into trouble. Such things were often done out of spite or revenge, in fact Jim had narrowly escaped getting into trouble from this cause.

The rain was now coming down fast and the thunder crashed overhead with loud, startling cracks. The vivid lightning frightened the mob of horses, and they galloped at headlong speed in the direction of the homestead.

The strange horse was a splendid mover and soon headed the others.

Jim saw he was a thoroughbred, or nearly so, and thought to himself:

'By Jove! he can gallop. Mine are a fast lot, but he has given them the go-by. He's a stallion too. Wonder whose he is? I must make inquiries. This is no put-up job to get me into trouble. Abe Dalton and his gang never have horses like that to handle!

He galloped after them and as he neared home saw the yard gates stood wide open.

'They'll go in,' said Jim to himself; 'and I must get up in time to shut them in.'

Faster and faster came the rain, and the hot ground steamed under the grateful cooling shower. In a few days the whole aspect of the country would be

changed, and nature appear in a different form. Instead of the dull, dry brown would come a bright, refreshing green. The grass grows with remarkable rapidity in such regions and the scene changes as though by magic. The horses had gone under the sheds for shelter, and Jim, dismounting, closed the gates. Having unsaddled his horse, and peeped inside to see how Willie fared, he went to look at the stranger amongst his mob.

Already there was a fight on and the stallion was trying to savage his nearest neighbour. A battle royal seemed imminent, but Jim Dennis meant to stop that.

He went for a stock whip, and quickly gave the combatants to understand he was acting as referee and that he had called time.

Crack came the lash and caught the stallion on his flank. He jumped as though he had been shot, and stood still quivering. Crack came the whip again, and the other combatant galloped round the yard.

The strange horse stood looking at him with a fiery light in his eyes. He evidently did not understand this unceremonious treatment, and resented the lash of the whip.

'You try it on. Just you try it on. You'll savage me, will you? My boy, you don't know Jim Dennis.'

Jim stood bareheaded, with the rain pouring down upon him, and he revelled in the glorious shower

bath. He had on a rough shirt, such as stockmen wear, a dullish red, it having seen some service, and his breeches fitted neatly into his riding boots. He was rather particular about such things for a bushman, and he may be called such without it being a misnomer.

The horse eyed Jim, and Jim kept his eyes steadily fixed on the horse.

There was a moment or two of uncertainty, and then, before the animal had time to plunge forward towards him, Jim Dennis whirled his whip round, and the lash came down on the horse's neck and curled.

With a jerk Jim had it freed again, and then the horse rushed at him.

He sprang on one side and escaped the furious attack. Quick as lightning, before the animal could turn, he had brought the lash down again on his back, and this time the horse did not turn, but galloped to the far side of the yard.

But the struggle was not ended.

The stranger again made an attack on the horse nearest him, and there was a general uproar and stamping of hoofs amongst the mob.

Jim returned to the attack and separated them. In doing so he became wedged in a corner against the fence, and the stallion came straight at him.

He had no time to use the lash, so, seizing it short in his hand, he twisted it round and raised the stock.

He struck the now infuriated horse a blow on the forehead, which dazed him for a moment but did not daunt him. The horse stood on his hind legs and commenced to strike at Jim with his fore feet.

Jim Dennis knew he had never been in such a tight fix before, and he commenced to wonder what would happen.

He struck the horse's fore legs again and again with the stock of his whip, but could not beat him off.

He heard the gate opened, but did not see who was there. Presently the stallion was attacked in the rear, and a vigorous lashing from a strong arm made him alter his tactics. He came down on all fours and then kicked furiously. Jim Dennis dodged round him, and, standing back to give himself more room, again plied his lash with effect.

The horse was now beaten, and took his defeat sullenly. He retreated, and received a parting whack as he went.

Jim Dennis then saw it was Constable Doonan who had so timely come to the rescue.

'You were in a tight corner, Jim. I came just in time. That's a brute of a horse. Where did you get him?'

'I didn't get him, he came of his own accord. He doesn't belong to me. I found him with my mob when I was out on the run. The storm gave them a fright, and they galloped into the yard. He commenced to savage my horses, so I had to separate them. We have had a toughish struggle.'

'Curious,' said Doonan. 'I wonder to whom he belongs. Looks like a thoroughbred. I have heard nothing about a horse being lost. He must have broken loose. Can you keep him here until I make inquiries?'

'If we can box him he'll be all right. Perhaps they were bringing him from Sydney or somewhere, and he managed to get away. Come inside, Fred, you are wet through.'

'It will do me good,' laughed Doonan. 'It is a long time since we had such a soaking. What a difference it will make to your place. By the way, how's the young un? I heard from Dr Sheridan he had been very ill.'

'He has had a narrow squeak, but he's pulled through, thanks to Dr Tom. Come in and see him. Willie is very fond of you,' said Jim.

'Oh, did you hear Rodney Shaw has come back from England?' said Doonan, as they went indoors.

'Has he?' said Jim. 'Why, he must have been away six or seven years.'

CHAPTER VI

RODNEY SHAW

RODNEY SHAW was the wealthiest squatter round Swamp Creek. He inherited the property from his father, and had taken no share in amassing the very large sum of money he found himself in possession of at an early age.

He was only two-and-twenty when he found himself his own master, and soon after his father's death he left his property in the hands of a manager and went to Sydney, where he remained for some time before he took his departure for London. The name of his station was Cudgegong, and it comprised an area of about thirty to forty square miles. In addition to this he held big shares in several mines in the western district, most of which paid good dividends. On his return from England he went straight to Cudgegong, 'to put things in order,' he said, although everything had gone on well during his prolonged absence.

As a lad he was not liked in the district, and as he grew older he became domineering and somewhat vicious in his habits.

He had the usual love of horses which seems bred in all Australians, and before he was of age he owned race horses.

He was a younger man than Jim Dennis by several years, but the two men had not been bad friends, in fact Rodney Shaw got on better with the owner of Wanabeen than with anyone else.

Jim Dennis was surprised to hear of his return, and asked Doonan if he was sure his news was true.

'Certain of it,' said the constable.

'I had it from Dr Tom, and he knows everything that goes on in these parts.'

'There's not much escapes him, I grant you,' laughed Jim; 'but I hardly think he is correct this time.'

'Why not ride over and see?' said Doonan. 'You were always welcome at Cudgegong, I hear.'

'I think I will,' replied Jim, 'as soon as the weather takes up. Perhaps I can be of use to him as he has been away so long.'

Constable Doonan remained at Wanabeen for the night, and had a long talk with Willie. The lad loved to hear of his exploits, and how he had captured bushrangers in Victoria, and Queensland, before he came into New South Wales.

When Doonan described the races he had seen in Melbourne the lad's eyes glistened, and he became quite excited.

'I'd like to ride in a real race,' he said.

'You're just cut out for a jockey,' laughed Doonan.

'Am I? Then I'll be one if dad will let me.'

'Do you hear that, Jim?' said the constable. 'Your boy wants to be a jockey.'

'Does he?' said Jim, as he entered the room. 'That's strange. I was only thinking the other day what a good one he would make.'

'Wait until I am strong and old enough, and I shall ride some winners,' said Willie.

'Hullo, there's the coach coming,' said Jim. 'I forgot it was Ned's day. Ned will be glad of this rain, for he has had a rough time of it lately.'

Ned Glenn pulled up at Wanabeen as usual, and, leaving a couple of passengers to grumble on the top of the coach, came inside for his accustomed chat.

'Mind no one runs away with the mails,' said Doonan, laughing.

'No fear of that near Wanabeen,' said Ned. 'I shouldn't mind if someone would take those two male passengers, though, and leave them somewhere.'

'Not very sociable, are they?' asked Jim.

'Regular bears. They have been growling all the way.'

'Put 'em inside,' said Doonan.

'No such luck. I'm glad they are fairly wet outside, but they must be precious dry inside.'

'I'll give them a quencher,' said Jim, good-naturedly.

'Don't be a fool; it would be wasted on them,' replied Ned. 'I can do with their share.'

Ned Glenn sat down and caught sight of one of the passengers looking at the house, evidently in search of him, and in hopes of a speedy departure.

'You keep calm, my friend,' said Ned, shaking his fist. 'It will do you good to cool in the rain a bit.'

'Any news?' asked Jim, when he had attended to Ned's want.

'Yes. Rodney Shaw has come back to Cudgegong. I don't know whether that can be reckoned as good news or bad, but it's true,' said Ned.

'It is a long time since he went away,' said Jim.

'Nigh on seven or eight years, I should think, maybe not quite so long.'

'He'll find his property all right. Benjamin Nix is a good manager,' said Jim.

'And a good fellow too,' answered Ned. 'Better than his boss, I reckon.'

Turning to Doonan, he said, 'There's likely to be trouble in this district before long, I hear.'

'How's that?'

'Horse thieves about again,' said Ned.

Jim Dennis thought of the strange stallion boxed in his yard, and glanced at Constable Doonan. Was there more rumour and suspicion to surround him?

'It's a rum go too,' said Ned. 'Rodney Shaw bought a fine stallion in Sydney, a thoroughbred, and sent him up to Cudgegong. The man in charge of him complains that someone either stole him or

let him loose while he was resting at Potter's. There'll be a deuce of a row at Cudgegong about it.'

'That's queer,' said Jim. 'A strange horse galloped into the yard with my mob yesterday during the storm. I wonder if he belongs to Mr Shaw.'

'You don't say so!' exclaimed Ned.

'Yes, I do; and, what's more, the brute would have made short work of me had not Fred Doonan arrived in time.'

He then explained to Ned what had happened.

'If he's such a savage horse,' said Ned, 'I shouldn't be at all surprised if the man did not let him go through sheer fright and now wants to cast the blame on someone.'

'That's probable,' said Constable Doonan. 'I'm going round by Potter's and will make inquiries. In the meantime, Jim, I would ride over to Cudgegong and let Mr Shaw know about it.'

'I'll go to-morrow,' said Jim.

Doonan took his departure, and soon afterwards Ned, much to the relief of his two passengers, clambered into the box seat and continued his journey.

Next morning it was still raining, but Jim Dennis cared little for this, in fact was glad of it. He saddled Bess and rode over to Cudgegong, a distance of about fifteen miles.

The mare revelled in the good going, and the

already green grass gave way beneath her feet. It was a luxury that had not befallen her for many a day, to gallop on yielding ground.

Midway between the two stations he saw a couple of mounted police, and recognised Sergeant Machinson and another constable he did not know.

'Wonder what brings him round here. Perhaps he has been to pay his respects to Rodney Shaw.'

Then he thought:

'If he has, he'll have heard of the loss of his horse. He's such a suspicious beggar, he might think I had a hand in "lifting" it. If the stallion in my place is the missing one, Machinson would be only too pleased to get me into trouble, though why I don't know. It's sheer spite because of that Potter's affair, and poor spite it is too. They have seen me, so I may as well ride over to them.'

He was passing them with a casual remark about the rain when Sergeant Machinson said,—

'We have just been over to Cudgegong. Mr Shaw has returned from England. He bought a valuable stallion in Sydney, which has been stolen. The man in charge of it says it was taken from Potter's. Have you seen anything of it yet?'

Jim Dennis did not hesitate to tell the story of how he found a stray stallion in his mob, and also said that Constable Doonan arrived at an opportune moment to rescue him.

'I was just riding over to Mr Shaw's to tell him about it,' said Jim. 'I heard from Doonan, and Ned Glenn, that he had lost a thoroughbred stallion.'

A suspicious, sneering smile came over Sergeant Machinson's face. 'Then you do not know who is the owner of this horse? It is not often you find stray thoroughbreds running about the country, I suppose?'

'No, do you?' asked Jim, who was not afraid of half-a-dozen Sergeant Machinsons.

'It is part of my duty to find them when they have been stolen,' said the sergeant.

'So I believe,' replied Jim; 'but if this horse I have is Mr Shaw's, it will save you any trouble in that line.'

'Except to catch the thief,' said the sergeant.

'Always provided the horse was stolen,' said Jim.

'Of course it was stolen; the man says so.'

'Then how did it come to be running about with my mob?' asked Jim.

'That's what I'd like to know,' was the suggestive and uncalled-for reply.

'What do you mean to infer by that?' asked Jim, hotly.

'Anything you please. Don't you think it needs some explanation?'

'I have told you what happened.'

'But you omitted to state how the horse came to be amongst your lot.'

'That is what I should like to find out. Perhaps you can help me,' said Jim.

'I shall do all in my power to apprehend the thief. There is too much of this sort of thing going on round here.'

'Yes, there is,' said Jim; 'and it is partly your fault, because you never catch the thieves. Why don't you try Dalton's gang?'

'That's my business,' said the sergeant, angrily. 'Remember I can make you account for having that horse on your premises.'

'I have accounted for it.'

'Shall you tell that story to Mr Shaw?'

'Certainly; that is what I am going over for.'

'Then we will ride back with you.'

'As you please,' said Jim; 'but I should prefer your room to your company.'

Sergeant Machinson bit his lip, but made no reply. He knew in his heart Jim Dennis's story to be true, yet this only aggravated him the more Such is the nature of some men, but Jim Dennis was not of them. When they arrived at Cudgegong station they were received, after a brief delay, by Rodney Shaw.

'I am glad to see you back, Mr Shaw,' said Jim, holding out his hand, and looking him straight in the face.

Rodney Shaw took his hand in a half-hearted way and said hesitatingly,—

'I have been away such a long time I have almost forgotten all my old friends, but you are none the less welcome for all that.'

'How he has altered,' thought Jim. 'I should not have recognised him had he been anywhere but at Cudgegong.

'So you returned with Dennis?' said Shaw to the sergeant.

'Yes. I fancy he has your horse,' said Sergeant Machinson.

'Let me tell you the story,' said Jim, 'or it may be misrepresented.'

He then gave Rodney Shaw an account of what had happened.

'It is very strange,' was his comment. 'I wonder how the horse got into your paddocks. My man says it was stolen.'

'I am as ignorant as yourself,' replied Jim, 'how the horse came there. If he is your horse, you can have him back by sending for him.'

Jim Dennis did not like the tone in which Rodney Shaw spoke; it seemed to imply a doubt about his story.

'Of course I will send for him. One of my men shall return with you.'

'I think you had better send two,' replied Jim, smiling.

'Is the horse as dangerous as that?'

'He was, but Doonan and myself tamed him down. Still, I think it would be safer to have two men.'

'Will you bring him over?'

'If you wish it,' said Jim, 'but I had rather your

own men did it. He might get lost on the way again.' This with a glance at the sergeant.

'Perhaps it would be better to send your own men,' said that worthy guardian of law and order.

Jim Dennis rose to go. He had not received a hospitable reception, and he was not a man to remain where he saw he was not wanted.

'I hope I shall see you again soon,' said Rodney Shaw, who seemed suddenly to think he had been too frigid.

'You may if I am riding this way,' was the quiet answer.

Although Rodney Shaw was wealthy, Jim Dennis considered himself his equal as a man, and so he was.

CHAPTER VII

OUTWITTED

DENNIS waited a short time to see if Rodney Shaw's men would return with him to Wanabeen, and as they did not appear he took his departure.

As he rode back he thought of the strange change that had taken place in Rodney Shaw.

'I suppose living in England has done it,' thought Jim; 'but I had no idea it would make such an alteration in a man. He looks so much older, and speaks differently. There's something about him I can't make out. He has such a shifty look, and might have done some great wrong, he has that half-frightened glance as though he feared detection. It is quite evident he does not mean us to be on our old footing. That will not trouble me, I'm as good as he any day. Strange how a few years can alter a man. He never was a friendly fellow, but he seems a regular bear now.

'If he prefers such men as Machinson, he's welcome to him. I'll get even with the sergeant one of these days. They say he is none too straight, and is not above accepting a tip now and again. If he lets

me alone I'll let him alone, but I'm hanged if he shall meddle in my affairs without any cause. Doonan ought to be in his place, he's a man anyway.'

The rain was still coming down, but it did not interfere with Jim's meditations. He wished it would keep on for a fortnight, but there were already signs of a break in the sky.

The reins hung loosely on the mare's neck, for he knew he could trust her not to stumble over any of the numerous rabbit holes, and she would make straight for Wanabeen.

In due course he arrived home.

'Two men have been here,' said Sal.

'What did they come for? Who were they?'

'I have not seen them before, but they said they had come for the horse they had lost a few days ago, and that had been seen on your run,' said Sal.

Jim stared; he could hardly believe what she said. Then it dawned upon him that the men who had stolen Mr Shaw's horse must have lost him again and tracked him on to Wanabeen; they were clever at such work, and only one set of men could do it, Abe Dalton's gang.

'Did they take it away?'

'Yes, and it went quietly enough,' said Sal. 'I think you took it all out of him.'

Jim smiled. He thought it very probable such was the case.

'How long have they been gone?'

'A couple of hours, or more.'

'I must go after them,' said Jim.

'Be careful, dad,' said Willie; 'they may belong to Dalton's gang.'

'I have something here that will settle half-a-dozen of Dalton's men,' he said, as he took a six-chambered revolver out of a cupboard and loaded it, putting more cartridges in his pouch. It was an old-fashioned weapon, or would be considered so now, but it was apt to be dangerous when handled by Jim Dennis. He kissed the boy and went out, saying he would return as speedily as possible.

'Poor old dad, he's always in trouble over something,' said Willie. 'I wonder why it is, when he is so good to you, and me, and everybody.'

'There's men about here as hate him 'cause he's honest,' said Sal; 'but don't you be feared for him, Willie, he's a good man and he'll come to no harm.'

'I wish I were a man,' said the lad. 'You'd see what I'd do.'

'What would you do?' she asked, smiling.

'Stick up for him. Back Dr Tom up when he stuck up for him, and Fred Doonan too. They're fond of dad, aren't they, Sal?'

'Yes, very fond of him.'

'And Fred Doonan's fond of someone else here,' said the lad.

'You, Willie? He's very fond of you,' she said.

'And he's fond of you, Sal. He said you are a real good sort, a regular white woman, even if you had dark blood in you. Oh, yes, he's fond of you, Sal.'

The half-caste's eyes gleamed with pleasurable pride, and her whole face changed. She was a comely woman, a very comely woman, with a heart and nature that would love fiercely, half savagely, if such a sentiment were roused within her.

'He said that about me?' she asked in a low voice. She could hardly believe it, so few, very few men had been kind to her, and none of her own sex. The black gins had hated her because of their ugliness and her good looks—they were not so very unlike their white sisters after all. Even in this almost deserted land there was love and hate, sorrow and joy, comedy and tragedy.

'Yes, he said that and more.'

'More! More, Willie?'

'He said you were like a mother to me, and you have been, Sal. I never had a real mother that I knew of; dad says she died when I was a baby.'

The woman stroked the child's hair and said,—

'I will always be your mother. I love you, and your father has been kinder to me than any man in the world.'

'Good-bye,' shouted Jim, and they sent him an answering cry.

'Two hours' start or more. Which way must I go?' thought Jim. 'If it is Dalton's men who have taken him, I know their ropes as well as they do themselves. They'll make for Barker's Creek. I'll chance it.'

Barker's Creek was a small hamlet consisting of half-a-dozen shanties, all occupied by the members

of the gang of which Abe Dalton was the head. They were a lawless, licentious lot, blacks and whites living together, regardless of law or order. There were about two dozen white men, and double that number of gins,—old and young,—and black fellows, camped around the wooden structures in humpies.

These blacks were part of King Charlie's tribe, but the old chief had cast them off; savage that he was, he had an instinctive feeling that his people were better than Dalton's men. He cursed them as they threw in their lot with the white men, and his sentence of excommunication was heard by those of the tribe who remained with him, and they carried the tidings into many places far distant. Even these blacks, uncouth and savage, had their laws, and rendered obedience to their old king.

It was a dangerous place was Barker's Creek, and its tenants ought to have been rooted out, but Abe Dalton was a cunning man and had contrived to keep Sergeant Machinson from meddling in his affairs.

Jim Dennis had no intention of riding alone into Barker's Creek. He wanted to catch his men before they arrived there.

He had a fresh horse under him, and he made the most of his mount.

He rode over the plain at a great pace, from time to time pulling up and dismounting to look for tracks. His practised eye soon found them, and sure enough there were three horses going in the direction of Barker's Creek.

'It's all right,' he muttered. 'I only hope I shall come up with them. I feel in a fighting humour, and they will have to stand and deliver, "hands up"; they are used to the sounds, they will know what they mean. It will put me in a bit of a hole if they reach Barker's Creek first. Machinson will swear I had a hand in sending the horse there, and that my ride over to Cudgegong was a ruse to deceive them and get the horse away; any cock-and-bull story would serve his purpose so long as it got me into a hole.'

He galloped on at a fast pace, and towards evening saw his men in the distance. They were in no hurry, and evidently did not fear pursuit. The horse was with them and going quietly.

'I have tamed him at anyrate,' said Jim. 'I'll tame them before I have done with them.'

He rode away to the left, for he knew a track by which he thought he could get ahead, and there wait until they came past.

The country near Barker's Creek was covered with scrub, and there was a considerable amount of shelter, much of it never having been cleared or touched in any way, but just left in its wild condition. He knew it would be a near thing between them, as the round would take him several miles out of his way. It was, however, the only course to pursue, so he sent his horse along at his best pace and hoped for success.

There is scarcely any twilight in the colonies, the sun goes down quickly, and day turns into night rapidly.

When Jim Dennis reached the spot he had ridden for he saw it would be almost dark in an hour, but that would serve his purpose.

If he could get hold of the stallion he knew the horse would gallop readily enough alongside his own.

He waited with the best patience he could muster, for he did not know whether they had passed the place. As the time went by he began to be afraid they had beaten him after all, and he had had his ride for nothing.

Presently, however, his quick ears caught the sound of horses' hoofs, and then he knew he had a chance of success. As they drew nearer he made ready to ride straight at them. Peering through the bushes that concealed him, he saw the two men coming along at a careless pace, evidently unaware there was any danger at hand.

When they were about fifty yards away he rushed up at them, and before they could prepare to meet him he covered one man with his revolver and said,—

'Now, you Dalton fellows, give up that horse There are six shots here, so you have no chance.'.

They knew him, and a volley of oaths came from them.

'He's not your horse,' said one of the men.

'That's my business. He is not yours, and you took him out of my yard. Hand him over.'

'You'll suffer for this, Jim Dennis. Abe Dalton is not the man to forget it.'

'You tell Abe Dalton and the whole of your dirty gang that I am not afraid of any of you. Now hand over the horse.'

He rode forward, still keeping his revolver handy.

The horse was handed over, and the man who had spoken before said,—

'We'll be even with you for this.'

'You are a set of cowards,' said Jim. 'There is not a fair fight in you. I am not afraid of half-a-dozen such as you.'

Then he thought, if they have revolvers it may be awkward, but he knew, after a moment's consideration, that had such been the case they would have risked it and used them.

It was Abe Dalton's plan to often send his men out unarmed, so that there was no danger of any shooting, for he knew when it come to murder it was a serious matter.

Jim rode away with his capture, and a volley of abusive language was sent after him.

He was undecided whether to take the horse to Wanabeen, or go to Cudgegong. He could reach the latter place early in the morning, so he made up his mind to go there. He could wait about until some of the hands were out, and as they were generally up early there would not be a long delay.

He reached Cudgegong about two o'clock, and as there was no one to be seen he tied the horse securely and, having hitched up his own some

distance away from the other, he went to see if there was a chair on the verandah he could rest in.

It was no uncommon thing for a stranger to sleep on the verandah at one of the stations, and in the morning be provided with a breakfast and then sent on his way.

He stepped quietly along the boards and soon found a comfortable seat.

He was tired, for he had been in the saddle many hours, and, although he was a man who could do with but little sleep, he commenced to feel drowsy.

How long he had been asleep he did not know, but he awoke with a start and listened.

There was a peculiar sound inside the room near which he sat.

He thought it was a man moaning, but was not sure. Then he heard someone moving about, and footsteps approached the window of the room which led on to the verandah.

He remained perfectly quiet and waited expectantly for some explanation of what he had heard.

CHAPTER VIII

AT CUDGEGONG STATION

HE had not long to wait. The doors were pushed open and someone looked out.

In the dim light he saw it was Rodney Shaw, and he seemed to be listening intently. Then he went inside, leaving the windows open.

'He must have heard me step on to the verandah,' thought Jim.

He heard him moving about the room again, and, although he had no desire to spy upon him, he thought it better to remain in his present position.

'Perhaps he has been indulging too freely,' said Jim to himself. 'He could take more than his share before he went away.

'Curse the thing!'

Jim heard these words distinctly, and then came the sound of a man stumbling over a chair.

It was strange behaviour on the part of Rodney Shaw, and Jim Dennis could not understand it.

In a short time all was quiet, and he decided to slip off the verandah and go round to the horses.

He was passing the open window when he heard a cry of surprise, almost of terror, from within, which caused him to stop.

Looking into the room, he saw Rodney Shaw sitting on his bed, in his pyjamas, and glancing at him with wide, staring eyes.

'Who the devil are you?' said Shaw in a wild tone of voice.

'It's only me, Jim Dennis.'

'What are you doing there? Why are you spying about on my verandah? I'll have you locked up,' said Shaw.

Jim laughed, and made excuses for him.

'He's not himself, he's been drinking,' he thought.

'I brought your horse back, and I camped in a chair on the verandah to wait until some of the hands were about.'

'I don't believe it. It's a—' began Shaw.

'Stop,' said Jim. 'Even if you have been on a "jag," I allow no man to call me that.'

He spoke in a resolute tone, and Rodney Shaw, pulling himself together, thought better of what he was about to say, and went out to him.

'You took me by surprise,' he said in an apologetic way. 'I have been absent so long that I am not accustomed to the change again.'

'How haggard and worn he looks,' thought Jim. 'I wonder what ails him.'

'Have you been on a "jag"?' asked Jim, smiling.

Rodney Shaw looked at him. He evidently did not understand what he meant.

Jim thought this strange.

'Surely you have not forgotten what a "jag" means. You have been on one or two in your time at Swamp Creek.'

Rodney Shaw laughed.

'You think I have been drinking. Well, I own up I did have a drop too much—first with Machinson, then after he left. It soon got hold of me. I am not as strong as I was.'

'I thought there was something of that kind,' said Jim. 'Let me tell you why I came here with the horse at this hour.'

'All right. Sit down.'

They seated themselves in a couple of chairs, and Jim commenced his story.

Rodney Shaw did not appear to take much interest in it, he seemed to be thinking of other things.

'It was Dalton's gang stole your horse,' said Jim; 'and if I were you I would insist upon Machinson "going" for them. They are a bad lot, and ought to be cleared out of Barker's Creek. They are a danger to the whole district.'

'You and Machinson don't seem to hit it,' said Shaw.

'No; but it is not my fault. He does not act on the square, and he has accused me of things I have never been mixed up in,' said Jim. 'You ought to be able to convince him that it is his duty to clear Dalton's gang out.'

'Why me in particular?'

'Because you are the biggest owner about here, and have more influence than any of us. You have only to mention the matter to the P.M. and he'll soon see that Sergeant Machinson carries out his duties or he'll know the reason why.'

'The P.M.?' questioned Shaw.

Jim laughed.

'Surely you have not forgotten Adye Dauntsey, the police magistrate at Barragong. He's stood your friend more than once when you have been in a scrape. Don't you recollect when he made it up between yourself and your father after that row in Swamp Creek?'

Rodney Shaw seemed uneasy, but Jim Dennis did not notice it. He was laughing to himself over the thought of the row in which he had taken a hand himself.

'So old—?'

'Dauntsey,' said Jim.

'Yes, Dauntsey. Is he there still, eh? Queer beggar and a rum name. How does he spell his Christian name?'

'Adye,' said Jim, spelling it out.

Shaw scribbled it on the back of the rest of his chair with a pencil he had near him.

'You don't mean to forget it,' said Jim. 'You must have a deuced bad memory.'

'I have. I met with a nasty accident in England. I was riding in a hurdle race and came a cropper on my head, and my memory has not been the same since.'

'I'm sorry for that,' said Jim. 'That accounts for it. I thought you seemed curiously forgetful about things around here.'

Rodney Shaw gave a sigh of relief.

'Yes, that explains it, as you say. If you remind me of people I knew, and places I have been to with you, and what we formerly did together, I shall recall it all, and not forget it again, but the spill seemed to knock a lot of old memories out of my head.'

'I have heard of such things before,' said Jim. 'I once knew a steeplechase rider who almost entirely lost his memory through an accident.'

'My case exactly,' said Rodney Shaw. 'What was that row at Swamp Creek? I forget it.'

'We were on a bender at old John Slade's pub,' said Jim, 'and you kissed his daughter, and he went for you hot and strong, although I don't think the girl had any objections.'

'You were fairly powerful in those days, and you fired Joe out of the bar, and a regular free fight took place, in which a lot of damage was done. Your old man was very angry about it, but Adye Dauntsey smoothed it over. I took your part, of course, and should have got into trouble, only they couldn't very well drag me into it and leave you out.'

Rodney Shaw laughed as he replied,—

'I recollect it quite well. We had some rare sprees in those days. You were always ready to stand by me.'

'I hope I shall always be ready to help a pal in trouble,' said Jim.

'I am sure you will. I am afraid I treated you rather off-handed the other day.'

'I didn't like your manner, I confess,' said Jim. 'I thought you were glad to get rid of me.'

'Not at all. You misunderstood me. I hope we shall be as good friends as ever.'

'I hope so,' said Jim. 'It will not be my fault if we are not.'

'I don't think I will meddle with Dalton's gang. No good will come out of it, and I have my horse again, thanks to you,' said Shaw.

'As you please,' replied Jim.

'But it would be for the good of the district if they were bundled out, neck and crop, and you are the proper man to see it done.'

'Sergeant Machinson has the matter in hand, and I will tell him all about your capture of the horse from Dalton's men. He is bound to take action then.'

'He will not; you see if he does,' replied Jim.

'You don't mean to say he stands in with a lot like that?'

'I won't go as far as that,' said Jim; 'but it looks like it. He never lifts a hand against them.'

'Well, I'll think the matter over. There is a good deal in what you say. Wait until I put some decent clothes on, and we'll go round and have a look at the horse. It would be rather a joke if he did not belong to me, after all this trouble.'

'There's not much fear of that,' answered Jim 'Thoroughbred stallions are scarce in these parts.'

They went round to the back of the house to where Jim had fastened up the horses.

The hands were about, and Rodney Shaw called to a man who was crossing the yard.

'This is Alec Beg, the man who brought the horse as far as Potter's,' said Shaw.

Jim Dennis looked him over and did not like him.

'A shifty customer, I'll bet,' he thought.

'We have found the stallion,' said Shaw.

'Have you?' exclaimed the man in evident surprise. 'Where is he?'

'Over there,' said Jim, pointing to the horse.

'Where the deuce did he come from?'

'I made the thieves give him up,' said Jim, looking straight at him.

'Then you knew who stole him?'

'Dalton's gang.'

'Who may they be?' asked Alec Beg.

'You'll find out before you have been long in this district,' said Jim. 'I'd advise you to keep out of their way, they'll do you no good.'

'I'm not likely to mix up with a lot like that.'

Jim had his doubts on that head, but made no remark.

'You'll have to be careful with this horse,' said Jim. 'He's got a devil of a temper, but I have tamed him down a bit. He had one of the biggest

hidings he'll ever get, and it has done him good. He looks a well-bred horse.'

'He's by Fisherman out of Mermaid, and his name is Seahorse.'

'That's something like blood,' said Jim, enthusiastically. 'I'd like to send a couple of mares to him, if you will allow me.'

'With pleasure. It is the least I can do after all the trouble you have taken,' replied Shaw.

'I have some very well-bred mares,' said Jim, 'and I'll bring a couple over some day.'

Alec Beg was standing by, and muttered,—

'He's a blooming fool to let a man like him get hold of that blood. He's one of those prying sort of fellows. Hang me if I like him.'

It was not feasible that Alec Beg would like Jim Dennis, because the latter was an honest man.

When Jim Dennis took his departure, Alec Beg said to Rodney Shaw,—

'I don't think you are wise to let him get hold of the Fisherman blood. You ought to keep it yourself about here.'

'A couple of mares will not matter much, and, besides, he got the horse back for me,' replied Shaw.

'That constable who came with Sergeant Machinson says he's a bad lot, and not to be trusted. He may have been in with Dalton's gang over this affair.'

'Don't be a fool and talk rubbish,' said Shaw. 'If he were one of the gang we should not have recovered the horse.'

He went inside, leaving Beg grumbling in the yard.

'I must keep in with Jim Dennis,' Rodney Shaw said to himself. 'He'll be useful to me. I am sorry my memory is so bad,' and he laughed curiously. 'So Adye Dauntsey is police magistrate at—what the deuce is the name of the place?—oh, here it is, and he picked up a piece of paper—Barragong. I wonder if the worthy P.M. will think I have altered much during the last eight or nine years. Probably he will, most people about here think me changed, even Benjamin Nix, my manager, says he would hardly have known me. The worthy Nix has not altered much, I'll be bound. So far as I can judge, he has managed things all right at Cudgegong—what a name to give a place! but it is suitable.

'Jim Dennis is a man to be trusted, and he will stick to a pal, he says, and I know he will keep his word. It's deuced slow here after London. I think in a few years I'll sell out and go back again. And if I do return, that lady friend of mine will probably find me out and create a scene. I hate scenes. Perhaps I am better off here, and in time I may settle down into a respectable married man.'

He laughed again, but there was no mirth in the sound. It was an ugly laugh, a laugh that betrayed the baseness of the man, the treachery lurking within. It was not a good laugh to hear.

CHAPTER IX

THE SORT OF MAN DR TOM IS

DR TOM SHERIDAN sat in his den concocting cooling drinks for himself, and mixtures of quite a different prescription for his patients.

On board ship, when he acted as medical adviser to the skipper, his officers, the crew, and the passengers—the last-named lot he considered of little account—he had been in the habit of dosing them with the same compound for all manner of complaints.

'It saves a heap of trouble, and it's always handy,' said Dr Tom, as he filled a bottle from his regular tap. 'If it does no good, there is the blessed and everlasting consolation that it can do no harm.'

Passengers annoyed Dr Tom, as they have continued to annoy ships' doctors ever since, for the doctor had a soul above medicine. He considered himself a poet, a truly dramatic poet, and he was sore with the world because his efforts had not been appreciated. He had cast his poems upon the mess-room table, in the hopes of them bearing fruit, and they had been neglected in the most aggravating fashion.

The skipper put the finishing touch to one of Dr Tom's efforts. The worthy medico had, after much toil and brain work, composed a poem which he believed would appeal to the skipper's heart.

It was a wild, weird thing, a concoction of fiery skies, blistering sun, howling winds, dashing waves, heaving billows, snow-flecked seahorses, and what not, and in the midst of this poetic chaos was a good ship, commanded by a worthy skipper with a fiery beard. That was where Dr Tom blundered. He had no tact, even if his poetic ship had, and the skipper's hair being of a bright, flaming colour, he resented this personal allusion.

When the poem was solemnly presented to him by his 'boy,' he read the first few stanzas with pride, but arriving at the fiery beard period, he flew into a rage, hurled himself into Dr Tom's cabin, and said,—

'Did you write this d——d insulting thing?'

The doctor was mortally offended, nay, he was more than that, he was hurt. He had expended many hours on the composition of that poem, and had neglected the groans of many patients in order to finish it off.

'That, sir, is an effort that has cost me dear,' he said.

'By the Lord, if there are any more such efforts, it will cost you untold wealth!' yelled the frantic skipper with the fiery beard, and he flung the offending poem into a mass of half-empty drug bottles.

Dr Tom picked it up carefully, smoothed it out, and caressed it as though it had been a pet kitten.

When he arrived in Sydney he secured the shipping reporter of the *Morning Light* and took him into his cabin.

'Read that,' said Dr Tom, in a solemn manner, handing the rejected of the skipper to the worthy press man.

The shipping reporter of the *Morning Light* blinked and looked uneasy. He had read Dr Tom's poems before, or pretended to, and the effect was not pleasing.

But the doctor kept good whisky in his den, and the man who chronicled the doings of ships on their voyages from far countries dearly loved a drop of the real stingo, which money could not then purchase in Sydney, and of which very little is to be had even unto this day.

The poem was duly read.

'It is one of your best efforts,' said the scribe. This opinion was diplomatic, and committed him to nothing.

The doctor smiled, and there was a pleasant jingle of glasses, and a soothing odour penetrated the stuffy little medicine box.

'Ah!' sighed Dr Tom, 'I knew *you* would appreciate it.'

A sound of liquid flowing into a glass was balm to the shipping reporter of the *Morning Light.*

'Try this. It's a drop of the best.'

The man of letters—ships' letters, sipped it with the air of a connoisseur.

'Splendid stuff, doctor, splendid,' he said.

'That poem has cost me many hours' deep thought,' said Dr Tom.

'No doubt. It is an elegant composition.'

'I wonder if the *Morning Light* would publish it,' mildly suggested the doctor. 'Here, try another; it will do you no harm.'

'I'll ask our sub; he's not a bad sort. He might cram it into the weekly,' said the reporter.

The doctor looked crestfallen.

'The weekly,' he said sorrowfully. 'Surely it is worthy of a place in the daily.'

'It is, doctor. Upon my word, it is; but you know what they are in the office. They're death on poems. It would be risking my place to suggest it for the daily.'

Dr Tom jingled the glasses, and there was something in them when the sound ceased.

'Try your best,' said Dr Tom. 'I'll give you a couple of real good startling pars about this voyage if you'll get it in the daily.'

'And you'll not tell the other fellows?'

'No. I'll not breathe a word to 'em,' said Dr Tom.

'Then I'll risk it. Now for the news.'

The doctor related a couple of rather spicy incidents that had occurred during the voyage from London, and the shipping reporter chuckled over them.

'I reckon these will get that poem in, doc.' The whisky had made him familiar in his speech. Sure enough Dr Tom succeeded in his object, and when his skipper read the poem in the *Morning Light* next morning, he went about Sydney saying things, and, encountering the happy doctor, vowed he would not take him back in his ship.

'I have no ambition to sail again in your old tub,' said Dr Tom. 'My fortune is made.' So Dr Tom remained in Sydney, found his fortune was not made, and eventually came to Swamp Creek.

As Dr Tom sat meditating over his fortunes, or what remained of them, he thought of many things.

He thought of the first mate on the ship he had left in Sydney, and who had cleared out at the same time as himself. He had never liked that mate, he was a bad lot, and Dr Tom had at one time serious thoughts of dosing him and giving him to the sharks.

He also thought of the days he had spent wandering about Sydney, almost penniless, until a friendly hand had helped him to Swamp Creek and a monotonous existence, and yet it was an existence he did not dislike. He had not an enemy in the place, so far as he knew, and everyone was kind to him.

True, he did a lot of work, and got very few fees, and had even on one occasion to borrow money from Jim Dennis to purchase drugs to supply to sick people.

'When all my accounts are settled,' said Dr Tom to Jim Dennis, 'I mean to buy a station and throw this job up.'

'Don't let the folk around here know that or you'll never be paid. They would not lose you for anything, old man.'

It was very hot after the rain, and Dr Tom had very little else to do but kill time.

Having bottled up his medicines, he commenced to smoke and think.

What a life his had been. One of those men who with a little exertion might have made a name for themselves, he had been contented to drift carelessly and aimlessly through life.

On board ship he had acquired the art of cultivating laziness, and he was an adept at killing time.

The doctor was a visionary dreamer, and happy in a thousand fancies he conjured up in his imagination.

Children loved him, for no one could tell them a yarn suitable to their tender years better than Dr Tom.

The youngsters of Swamp Creek darted in and out of his dwelling in unrestricted freedom.

'Bless their little hearts, they have overturned that medicine chest again,' he would say on looking at the havoc they had made, and then proceed to put matters to rights in his own careless way.

But when there was danger at hand and Dr Tom was called, as he had been to Willie Dennis, to try

and save life or relieve suffering, the best part of the man in him came out, and he strove with might and main to conquer death, and he often succeeded.

He was pottering about as usual, with no coat or waistcoat on, when Constable Doonan came in.

'Busy as usual, Dr Tom,' said the constable in a hearty voice.

'No, my boy, I am not busy. I have been sitting down making up a few prescriptions and picking up a few threads of the past.'

'And how do the threads unravel?' asked Doonan.

'Fairly well, my lad. There's a few tangles, but they are not of much account; there's no occasion for any cutting.'

'No, I'll bet there's not,' said Doonan. 'Jim Dennis is mighty proud of the job you have made of that lad of his.'

'Nice little chap,' said Dr Tom. 'He had a narrow squeak, and I don't mind telling you, if it hadn't been for Sal's care he might have gone before we got there. That woman's a marvel. Wonder who her father was.'

'They give Rodney Shaw's father the credit for it,' said Doonan.

'Eh! You don't say so! Bless me, what a heathenish lot they are about here.'

'Try and convert 'em, doctor.'

'Not I. We ought to import a few pulpit thumpers and let them try their hands.'

'They ought to start on Dalton's gang. I hear there is trouble brewing there.'

'Who's the victim this time?' asked Dr Tom.

'Jim Dennis.'

'Then, by heavens, he'll find one or two to help him!' said Dr Tom, bringing his fist down with such a bang on the table that all the bottles danced. 'What's it about?'

Doonan related how Jim Dennis had taken Seahorse from Dalton's men and restored him to Rodney Shaw.

'Just like Jim. He's the best fellow in the world,' said the doctor. 'We must see him through this. Why does not Machinson clear the whole lot out?'

'That's what I would like to know,' answered Doonan. 'It's not my place to interfere.'

'Something will have to be done soon,' said Dr Tom. 'The gang is a regular pest, and gets worse and worse every week.'

'You go to Barker's Creek sometimes, I think?' questioned the constable.

'Yes. I cannot refuse to attend a sick woman or child even amongst such a crowd, but I have told Abe Dalton I would not go near him or his men if they were dying.'

'You have plenty of pluck,' said Constable Doonan, admiringly.

Dr Tom waved his arm in a gesture of disdain as he replied,—

'There's not much pluck wanted to beard a fellow

like Dalton. I'm going to Barker's Creek to-morrow to see a woman and her child. One of the ruffians came in here to-day to ask me. I gave him a bit of my mind, you may bet. I'll go, and if I see Abe Dalton, I'll tell him in the midst of his gang that if he harms Jim Dennis, or anything belonging to him, I'll make him suffer for it.'

'It will only make matters worse for Jim,' said Doonan.

'Nothing of the kind. Dalton knows as well as I do that I am the only man around here that can help him when there is sickness at Barker's Creek, and such men are terribly afraid of diseases and fevers. If an epidemic broke out at the Creek it would not be an unmitigated evil, but I would do my best for the women and children all the same. As for Dalton and his curs, they ought to die in a heap, like rabbits in a drought.'

Constable Doonan had seldom seen Dr Tom so much in earnest, and he was almost sorry he had mentioned Jim Dennis in connection with the gang, for he knew that he had roused the worthy man.

'Shall I go with you to-morrow, doctor?' he asked.

'No. You would do harm, not good. A constable at Barker's Creek is like a red rag to a bull. They would rush you, Fred, my lad—rush you.'

CHAPTER X

A FRIGHTENED SCOUNDREL

BARKER'S CREEK was several miles from Swamp Creek, and next morning Dr Tom's black boy, aged about forty, and looking ten years older, hitched the ill-groomed horses to the worse-kept buggy.

It was indeed a remarkable turnout, and so the doctor thought as he examined the 'joins' of the harness to see if it would hold out.

The black boy contemplated the whole thing with ludicrous pride, evidently under the impression he had done his duty by both horses and buggy.

The doctor stowed his bag under the seat, together with a suspicious-looking flask, and clambered into the buggy. His weight caused it to heave over in an alarming manner, and when the start took place Dr Tom appeared to be in danger of being hurled from his seat.

He drove slowly, and it was well on towards noon when he arrived at Barker's Creek, and looked around him with an air of disgust.

'What a hole,' he muttered, 'and what beasts these men are.'

Barker's Creek was not an inviting place by

any means. It lay in a hollow and was surrounded by a rough, uncleared bush country. Tall, gaunt trees, branchless until near the tops, towered round the place like hugh scaffold poles. Their appearance at night was weird, as they were of a slaty white colour, and resembled huge, gaunt spectres. The shanties in which the men lived and the humpies of the blacks were not visible until the visitor was close on to the spot. It was secluded, cut off from the world, and fittingly so.

Some terrible orgies took place here, and the howls and cries of the black gins, when Dalton's men were amongst them, denoted that scenes of brutality were being enacted.

The blacks were herded together like animals, and their humpies were made of the branches of trees suspended, tent-like, on poles, and their resting-places were on the ground.

Numerous stray curs were prowling around, playing with the naked little black children, who had no more intelligence, if so much, as the dogs.

The men of the gang had better accommodation, but it was poor enough, and the only really decent house in the place was Abe Dalton's. It was before this house that Dr Tom pulled up his horses, and, getting out of the buggy, went up the steps on to the verandah. The house, like all the others, was built on piles, and stood a considerable height from the ground; in fact horses were often sheltered beneath.

'Are you in, Abe Dalton?' shouted Dr Tom.

'Yes; come in,' said a gruff voice.

Dr Tom entered and found Abe Dalton lying on a camp bed, groaning and tossing from side to side.

He was a big, powerful man, with a coarse face that would have been red had not constant exposure to all winds and weather made the skin as brown as parchment. His hair was long, black, and ill-kept, and his big hands and feet denoted the coarse blood in his veins.

Dr Tom looked at him, and it dawned upon him that he had been summoned to Barker's Creek under false pretences. It was not a woman and child who needed his aid, but Abe Dalton himself.

'So it was a lie,' he blurted out.

'What's a lie?'

'That hound you sent to me, said a woman and child were ill.'

'Don't you call my men hounds,' growled Dalton.

'I call them by their proper names. Perhaps curs would be better,' said Dr Tom.

Even Abe Dalton winced at the cutting tones.

'I'm devilish bad, doctor,' he said, 'and I was afraid you would not come if I sent for you to attend me. Now you are here, it is not worth while going back without trying your hand on me,' said Dalton.

'You will get no assistance from me,' said Dr Tom.

'I would prefer to kill rather than cure you, and the country would be well rid of you.'

'But I am real bad,' groaned Abe Dalton. 'Can't you see I'm bad?'

'Yes. I never saw a man in a worse state of fever, and other complications. I shall not be at all surprised to hear of your death in a day or two; and, mind you, it will not be an easy death. You will not fall asleep and pass out of the world peacefully. Oh, dear, no. You will struggle and fight and gasp for breath, and eventually choke and go black in the face, but your looks will not matter where you'll go to. It's precious hot at Barker's Creek, but it's a mere trifle to the oven you'll be put into.'

A volley of oaths came from the tormented man, and Dr Tom chuckled to himself.

'I think I have frightened him,' he thought, 'made him a trifle uneasy. He's not as bad as all that, but it will do him good to make him think he is going to peg out.'

'I can cure you, Abe Dalton, but I am not going to try. Not I. I'm not the man to cheat the devil, or anyone else, of his due. You are not a picturesque object now, but this is nothing to what you will be in a day or two. You'll be such a horrible sight that no one will come near you, not even a black gin. And you have a real good, thirsty fever on you, and you'll not be able to get a drop of water. I'll tell you what will happen before the end comes.

You'll see things, shadows of your victims, and they'll sit all round you, grinning, and waiting for the end. You are in for a good time, Abe Dalton, and I'll leave you to it,' and Dr Tom moved towards the door.

Abe Dalton was thoroughly frightened and cowed. The perspiration stood in big drops on his grimy forehead, and after lingering there a few moments, started to race down his face like raindrops on a window-pane. He swept them away with his great, horny hand and, turning over with a groan of pain, called out,—

'For God's sake, don't leave me to die, doctor. I ain't fit to die. I daren't die. Come back and I'll do anything for you, give you any money you care to ask for, only come back and save me!'

Dr Tom came back.

'I can't die. I daren't die. I'm afeared,' and the wretched man shuddered and fell back, terror-stricken.

The doctor heard him and stopped. A thought had occurred to him.

'This may be useful in Jim Dennis's case,' he said, and returned to the room.

'So you are afraid to die, Abe Dalton? Don't take God's name in vain, He will not hear you; you have cursed Him all your life, and now you want Him to save you. Stop that shivering, you coward!'

'You'll help me, doctor, you'll help me?' he moaned.

'Yes; I'll help you on one condition,' said the doctor.

'Name it. Any condition you like. I don't care what it is.'

'Swear to me you will not allow any of your gang to injure Jim Dennis, or anything belonging to him.'

Abe Dalton could have howled with rage. He hated Dennis and meant to be even with him.

'You hesitate,' said Dr Tom.

'No, no,' said Dalton. 'I'll swear it. None of my gang shall harm a hair of his head.'

'And not molest anything that is his,' said Dr Tom.

'No. I swear no harm shall come to him or his property,' said Abe Dalton.

'How do I know I can trust you? 'asked Dr Tom. 'An oath from such a man is worthless.'

'I'd not dare to take a false oath, when I might die in a couple of days,' groaned Dalton.

Dr Tom thought this probable. Even if Abe Dalton recovered, he might, for once in a way, keep his oath; at anyrate he would risk it, and Jim Dennis would be safe from the gang.

'I am willing to trust you this time,' said Dr Tom. 'I can pull you through; but, mind, if you break your word, I'll never leave you until I have put a halter round your neck. There's evidence enough to hang you on, if it is only hunted up.'

He gave Abe Dalton a draught, and waited until

he was asleep, then he went outside and breathed more freely.

A cluster of men, members of Dalton's gang, stood round the buggy. They seemed anxious about their leader, for he was the cleverest of them all, and if he went they knew there would be trouble amongst themselves before another chief was elected. It would be a shooting matter probably, and some of them would lose their lives.

The man Dalton had sent to Swamp Creek to tell Dr Tom a woman and child were ill, stepped forward and said,—

'How is he? Will he pull through?'

'Yes,' said Dr Tom, 'with care; but he must be kept quiet. Now, you fellows, first listen to me. I am doctoring Abe Dalton on one condition, a condition he has sworn to fulfil. He has promised that none of his gang shall molest or harm, in any way, Jim Dennis or his belongings. Do you hear that?'

The men looked sullen. None of them had any liking for Jim Dennis, for he was more than a match for them, and they did not like being beaten.

'What do you say to it?' asked Dr Tom. 'Remember Abe Dalton's life rests upon your answer.'

'We'll keep his promise—eh, mates?' said the man who had already spoken.

The others assented moodily.

'That is well, said Dr Tom. 'Mind, if any harm comes to Dennis through you, I'll not rest until I see you all hanged. You know me, and you know I am not afraid of you.'

They admired Dr Tom and knew his courage. Not many men would care to come alone to Barker's Creek as he had done many times.

'You're a plucky chap, doctor,' said one of the men.

'It does not require much pluck to face a lot of beggars like you,' was the retort.

'Then the police can't have much of it,' laughed one.

'Some of these days you will find they have plenty of pluck,' said Dr Tom. 'If they were put on your track now, they would be only too glad of the job. It's Sergeant Machinson holds them back, and he'll have to answer for it in due time.'

'Machinson,' laughed one man. 'He's a beauty, he is. Ask him how much Abe Dalton has put into his pocket. It's squaring Machinson that keeps us poor, d——n him!'

Dr Tom pricked up his ears.

This was a nice little bit of information that might come in handy and do his friend Constable Doonan a good turn some day.

'So Machinson fleeces your leader, does he?' said Dr Tom. 'A nice scandal that is, but no one would believe you fellows.'

'We can prove it,' came from two or three of them.

'Can you, indeed?' said Dr Tom. 'A nice lot of beauties you are to give evidence. No sane man would hang a dog on your evidence.'

They growled at him and used powerful language, but he laughed in their faces.

He left them to attend to Abe Dalton, whom he found still asleep.

Dr Tom remained at Barker's Creek all night, and the next day still saw him there.

He did not leave Abe Dalton until he was out of danger, and even that arrant scoundrel could not kelp feeling grateful for the attention shown him, although gratitude was a stranger to his nature.

CHAPTER XI

'TRY WILLIE'

A FEW years quickly pass by, and very little change is noticeable in such places as Swamp Creek and on stations like Wanabeen and Cudgegong. The life there was monotonous enough, but there was a kind of fascination about it, and Jim Dennis would not have changed places with any man.

When he had thoroughly recovered from his illness Willie Dennis rapidly became strong, and now at twelve years of age was a fine, healthy lad.

Like his father, he was a good horseman, and already, even at this early age, he could ride any horse on the station. He had, as it were, been born and bred in the saddle, for ever since he could remember he was accustomed to ride about with his father.

It was the lad's ambition to be a jockey, and win a good race for his father. He did not mean to ride for everyone, there was no occasion for that; all he wanted was to be on the back of his father's horses when they ran in races.

Jim went in for breeding blood stock during the past few years, and had several promising

youngsters by Seahorse, and Rodney Shaw was rather jealous at Dennis's stock turning out better than his own.

'I was a fool to allow him to mate those mares with Seahorse. I ought to have kept the blood for myself, especially after the trouble it cost me to procure it.' He forgot that, had it not been for Jim Dennis, he would probably have lost the horse altogether.

Rodney Shaw had been to Wanabeen several times, and of late his visits had been more frequent. He was an unprincipled man, and once he coveted anything he tried all in his power to possess it.

Of one thing he envied Jim Dennis, and that was his possession of the half-caste woman Sal. Rodney Shaw laughed at the idea of this woman living under Dennis's protection and being sacred to him. He had been assured such was the case by people who knew the life the owner of Wanabeen led, but he laughed at the assurance and said he knew better than that.

On one occasion he had, in a roundabout way, asked Jim Dennis if he would part with her, and hinted at a consideration. The look Dennis gave him made him quail, and he stammered out a lame excuse that he meant no offence, and that, of course, a black woman could not be regarded in the same light as a white.

'Black Sal has been more faithful to me than the white woman, and for no recompense. She has been a mother to my boy ever since my wife left me.'

Rodney Shaw started, and looked uneasily at the speaker. He had heard but little of Jim Dennis's past life, and the owner of Wanabeen seldom alluded to his troubled matrimonial experiences.

'I did not know you had been married,' he said.

'Yes,' replied Jim, bitterly, and then unburdened himself of his wretched story. It did him good to talk about it sometimes, relieved his feelings and revived his desire for vengeance on the man who had wronged him.

'It would go hard with that man if you came across him?' said Rodney Shaw.

'Yes, it would go hard with him.'

'Perhaps he did not know she was a wife—your wife. She may have deceived him, as she did you.'

'Make no excuses for him,' said Jim Dennis. 'Wife or no wife, he must have wronged her, because he could not marry her. That is enough for me. Only let me come across him, anywhere, and at any time.'

Rodney Shaw was glad he was not that man.

Young Willie Dennis had ridden over to Cudgegong many times, and Rodney Shaw made him welcome. He seemed to like the lad, and enjoyed his prattle. He learned a good deal of the life they led at Wanabeen from him, and gathered that black Sal was indeed a mother to the lad.

In his heart, however, he wished to possess her, and wondered how best to accomplish his end. It would be difficult to attain, but he had in his life

overcome many such difficulties, and his victims rued the day they met him.

Country race meetings in those days were carried on with an amount of enthusiasm the ordinary phlegmatic race-goer of to-day would fail to understand.

The whole district for miles round was roused, and there was earnest rivalry between owners of horses to win events for which only a few pounds, or a cup of small value, were given as a stake.

It was mainly through the exertions of Jim Dennis, backed by Dr Tom Sheridan, who acted as secretary, that the Swamp Creek races had become so popular and successful. Two meetings were held during the year, and five events decided on each occasion. The chief interest, however, centred in the Swamp Creek Cup, and this year it was to be of the value of two hundred pounds, and a silver cup.

Rodney Shaw had increased his popularity by giving half this stake, and it had been a comparatively easy matter for the enthusiastic Dr Tom to collect the money necessary to provide for the other event. Jim Dennis had a laudable desire to win this cup, and he had a horse he thought possessed a first-rate chance, if properly and carefully trained.

The difficulty at these meetings was to obtain a good rider, and Jim Dennis wished his son had been a year or two older, and had more experience, so that he might have the mount on Neptune, the horse he thought might win.

Neptune was by Seahorse, and his dam, La Perouse,

was one of Jim's best mares. He was a grey, a beautiful colour, and uncommon in race-horses.

'There are not many good greys,' said Jim; 'but once you do get a good one that colour he is generally an out and outer.'

He thought this description applied to Neptune, whose fault was that he inherited a good deal of the temper his sire displayed on a memorable occasion at Wanabeen.

The grey stood sixteen hands high, or a shade over, and was powerfully built, and no fault could be found with his shape in any respect. He was fast as the wind, and, moreover, could stay, and was sound in wind and limb.

If carefully handled he seldom displayed much temper, but it was in him all the same, and great caution had to be exercised to keep it in check.

Neptune had taken a great fancy to Willie, and the lad could do almost anything with him.

It gladdened Jim Dennis's heart to see his boy perched on the grey's back, and he watched them with pride as Neptune went a long, striding gallop with his light burden.

'If I could only persuade myself Willie would not lose his head in the race, I would let him ride the horse, but it is too much to expect a lad of his age to keep cool in the midst of so much excitement. If I put Ben Madsley up, he's as likely as not to ruffle the horse's temper, and then farewell to all chance of winning. I have a good mind to

put Willie up and risk it, although I shall be laughed at and called a fool. If he won, the laugh would be on my side, I reckon.'

It wanted a month to the day of the races, and Neptune was doing splendid work, being ridden each day by Willie Dennis.

Jim rode over to Swamp Creek to consult Dr Tom. That worthy man of many occupations was, as usual, glad to see Jim. Since the day he saved Abe Dalton from death, the leader of the gang had kept his word, and Jim Dennis and his belongings had not been molested.

Jim was surprised at this, because he knew how Dalton would feel about him in the matter of rescuing Rodney Shaw's horse from his clutches. He did not know he owed this immunity to Dr Tom, and the doctor took good care he should not learn it from him.

'Well, Jim, and what's the news? How does Neptune fare, and is Willie all right?' said Dr Tom.

'Everything is going on splendidly,' said Jim. 'The horse could not be doing better, and Willie's as fit as a fiddle. I'm in a bit of a fix, though.'

'Not short of money surely?' said Dr Tom.

'No, not that,' laughed Jim. 'There is not much chance of throwing money about freely at Wanabeen.'

'I suppose not,' replied the doctor. 'In Swamp Creek there would not appear to be much chance of

spending to the casual outsider's vision, but it's wonderful how the money goes even here. I'm always hard up, and blessed if I know how it happens. What do you think Alf Sniggers asked me this morning?'

'I don't know, could not even make a guess at it,' said Jim. 'He's a funny chap is Sniggers.'

'He owes me an account, and he wanted to know if I'd take a bullock in payment. Now what the deuce is the good of a bullock to me? I couldn't sell it—everyone round here wants to sell, not to buy. There's no chance of eating it, and, being of the wrong sex, there's no milk to be got out of it, and, in fact, it would be on my hands and a perfect nuisance. I explained these little facts to Sniggers, and what do you think he said?'

'Out with it,' laughed Jim.

'The beggar said that any doctor who wouldn't swop a few dirty drugs for a real live bullock must be a fool, and he "wouldn't have nothing more to say to him." Upon my word, Jim, he went away in a high state of indignation, for all the world as though I had done him an injury.'

'Did he settle the account?' asked Jim, laughing.

'Not he. I have put it down in my third volume of bad debts,' said Dr Tom, mournfully. 'But what's your trouble? I was forgetting about that.'

'It's not exactly a trouble, it's a difficulty,' said Jim. 'I don't know who to put up on Neptune in the race. Madsley will ride for me, but he's got a queer temper, and a rider with a nasty temper and a horse with a nasty temper generally have differences. If Madsley and Neptune happened to differ in the race, or just before it, and commenced to argue the matter, there would be no cup or two hundred sovs. for me.'

Dr Tom looked thoughtful, and shook his head.

'I don't think I'd risk putting Madsley up.'

'But who the deuce am I to put up?'

'Willie. Try Willie. Give the little chap a chance. By Jove, Jim, he'll win it, I feel it right here,' and he banged his chest with his fist.

CHAPTER XII

MAINLY CONCERNING A DOG

'IT'S asking too much of the lad,' said Jim Dennis, in reply to the doctor's suggestion to 'Put Willie up.' 'He's only twelve, and you can't expect him to have the head of a man.'

'But that is just what he has when he is on a horse,' commented Dr Tom. 'The little chap is a splendid rider, and as cool as his dad, which is saying a lot. He'll take a pride in riding Neptune, and Ashworth himself would not frighten the little chap. No, Jim, you can take my word for it, he has an old head on his young shoulders, and if you put him up he will do both himself and the horse justice.'

The doctor's argument coincided with Jim's inclinations, and he did not require much persuading.

'Ride back with me to Wanabeen,' said Jim, 'and we'll break it gently to him. It will be great news for him. He'll not believe it at first.'

'Oh, yes, he will,' said Dr Tom. 'Not believe it! He'll be only too proud to believe it. There's only one thing I envy you of, Jim, and that is the possession of such a lad as Willie. I'm not a marrying

man, but I would give a good deal to possess a little chap like him.'

'Shocking, doctor. You ought to know better. Consider your morals,' laughed Jim.

'Oh, you dry up. You know exactly what I mean. I want a companion, such as the lad is to you. I sit and talk for hours at a stretch at my medicine bottles and old Baalim down there,' and he pointed to a sleepy-looking old dog snoring in a corner, half-dingo, half-kangaroo dog, and a dash of other breeds thrown in.

'I'll find you a better dog than that,' said Jim, with a quiet smile, knowing that any reflection cast upon Baalim's character would be indignantly repudiated by his owner.

'Find me a better dog!' exclaimed Dr Tom. 'Where is there a better dog? I wouldn't part with Baalim, not for money down to the extent of volume one of my bad debts library. That dog, let me tell you, Jim Dennis, is a marvel of intelligence. He's a humorous dog. He's about the only dog I ever knew who appreciated my violin playing. I have never known him howl when I am manipulating that instrument.'

'He must be extraordinarily patient,' said Jim. Perhaps he has no ear for music.'

'I have no wish to quarrel with you, Jim Dennis,' said Dr Tom, with a lordly air. 'Perhaps you have not heard my latest composition,' and he went off in the direction of his violin-case.

'I am afraid I must be going,' said Jim, innocently.

Dr Tom turned round sharply and said,—

'I'm sure you will like it.'

'I'll take it for granted,' said Jim. 'Please don't rob Baalim of his legitimate amusement. If that dog can stand your violin playing, Dr Tom, I'd never part with him; no other member of the canine race would ever put up with it.'

'I have composed an "Ode to Spring,"' said Dr Tom.

'I should have thought you were owed quite enough without piling up additional debts,' said Jim.

'Seize him, Baalim,' shouted the doctor.

Baalim raised his head, yawned, licked his fore paws one by one, turned over and snarled.

'How long have you had that dog?' questioned Jim, anxious to keep the doctor away from the violin-case.

'Several years. He arrived here one morning casually, on his own account. I shall never forget the inquiring look on his face as he came up those steps. It was the sort of look which conveyed the impression that he was thinking, "I wonder what kind of boots he wears and if he kicks hard?" It was not exactly a frightened look, but the glance of a dog that had seen a good deal of the slings and arrows, I think—the arrows of outrageous fortune. He didn't ask to remain, but he demanded his breakfast in such an appealing manner that I fed him. From that day to this he has never left me. He

is a faithful companion, and his breed may be defined as "various." Moreover, he is an ass of a dog, that's why I call him Baalim.'

'Has he many good qualities?' asked Jim.

'He's full of good qualities, but he's a fool to himself. Instead of seeking repose on his mat, he circulates round the Creek on knight-errant adventures. He has fought every dog in Swamp Creek singly and in batches. He not only gets himself into trouble, but he drags me into it along with him. The number of excuses I have made for that dog's behaviour would surprise you. I believe he is grateful. Baalim, are you grateful?'

The dog slowly rose from his recumbent position and waddled up to Dr Tom. He placed his big, shaggy head on the doctor's knee, and looked up into his face. If ever a dog wished to express gratitude in a canine way it was Baalim at that moment.

'What an ugly beggar he is,' said Jim; 'but he looks a real good dog.'

Baalim was ugly, and he seemed to glory in it. He was unlike all other dogs. He had a dirty, yellowish-brown coat, his hair was uneven, it seemed to stick out of him in shreds and patches. His body was long and his legs were short, stumpy, and out of proportion. His tail was useful for whipping off flies, and it resembled the thick part of a stock whip lash. His head was wolfish in shape, and when he smiled, as dogs will smile at

strangers, his teeth were ominous. His eyes were the best part of him. They were expressive, and he talked to Dr Tom with them, or, to be more correct, through them, in a most interesting way.

Baalim was a shrewd dog, and he was a bit of a diplomatist. He was an adept at the art of creating quarrels and of patching them up. In his perambulations round the Creek with Dr Tom he found much to interest and amuse him.

When the doctor was attending a patient, Baalim attended to the patient's dog, and these attentions generally ended in a dispute.

He was a particular dog, and after the doctor he bestowed his affections upon Jim Dennis and Constable Doonan.

When Baalim was left in charge of Dr Tom's sanctum no man dare enter it. Any attempt to do so would have been followed by serious consequences.

'Ride back with me, and ask Baalim to attend us,' said Jim.

'He wants a run; it will do him good. Take some of the fat off him.'

'Then you'll return with me?' asked Jim.

'Yes, and take the dog with me. He'll amuse Willie for an hour or two.'

'And to pass the time he can have a battle royal with Towser in the back yard,' said Jim.

Dr Tom shouted for his boy to saddle his horse, and the black fellow soon brought it round to the front.

They were not long before starting, and in due course arrived at Wanabeen.

Willie was out somewhere, and Sal went in search of him. She was not long in finding him, and when the lad heard Dr Tom was there he was overjoyed.

The doctor was as pleased to see him as Willie was to greet him.

'There's some good news for you, Willie,' said Dr Tom.

'What is it?' asked the boy, eagerly.

'How would you like to ride in a race, a real race, not a helter-skelter race with your dad? A dozen horses or more, my lad, and the colours up, and the people shouting and cheering and yelling themselves hoarse.'

'That would be grand,' he replied; 'but it's too good to be true.'

'Not a bit of it, ask your father,' said Dr Tom.

Willie looked at Jim Dennis, and his father said,—

'How would you like to ride Neptune in the cup? Do you think you could manage him?'

The lad clapped his hands.

'Manage him!' he cried. 'Why, I can do anything with Neptune. Will you let me ride him?'

'Yes, my lad, you shall ride him, win or lose. I'll risk it, although you are only a youngster.'

Willie capered with delight and ran outside, followed by the doctor's dog.

'Come along, Baalim,' shouted Willie. 'We'll have a rare romp over this.'

Away they went towards Neptune's box, the dog scampering after him in his usual clumsy fashion.

'Bless the lad, how full of life he is!' said Dr Tom. 'I take quite a fatherly interest in him. I guess he's half mine, because I saved his life.'

'Do you think I shall ever forget it?' asked Jim.

'No, old pal, I don't think you will; but there are people who regard a doctor as a mere instrument, a thing to play upon and tune to their own fancy. If he cures, well and good, and he doesn't get any credit for it, and sometimes no pay. If he fails—well, if it hadn't been for that clumsy, blundering fool of a doctor—you know the rest, Jim.'

'You are a clever fellow, and you are wasting the best years of your life in a hole like Swamp Creek,' said Jim.

'I'm not a clever fellow. I might have been. I had every chance. I drifted, old man, just drifted. Do you know my besetting sin?'

'Didn't know you had any sins,' said Jim.

'I have, and the worst of the lot is a constant "it isn't-worth-the-bother" sort of feeling. If it had not been for that I might have got on. As a medical student I was quick at learning, too quick. Things came so easily to me that I never bothered about 'em. That's not the way to get on. It's the plodders beat all chaps like me.'

'Nonsense!' said Jim. 'You never value yourself at your true worth.'

'I believe you are right, although I'm not con-

ceited enough to let the world think so. By gad, Jim, I'd like a chance, a big chance. Something with danger in it. Something I might risk my life in to benefit my fellow-creatures. Do you know, Jim Dennis, I'm always hovering on the verge of a grand discovery, and it never comes off. When I have it all fixed up nicely, and think this is the thing, the whole blessed fabric topples over, and I am buried in the ruins of my own fancies.'

'But you manage to scramble out of the *débris*,' said Jim.

'That's just it. I scramble out of the *débris* and commence to pick up the best part of the breakages. It's the piecing 'em together again, Jim, that troubles a fellow. They never seem to fit in, or to stick together when they are fixed up,' said Dr Tom, dreamily.

Jim Dennis knew Tom Sheridan had grit in him. He knew that no man had a braver heart or nobler courage, if put to the test, but it would be an uncommonly hard test, to bring out those qualities to their fullest extent.

A disappointed man Dr Tom Sheridan certainly was not, nor was he an unhappy man. He was too good for Swamp Creek, and yet it was good for the Creek for him to be there.

'Look at that youngster,' said Dr Tom, suddenly.

Jim Dennis turned round and saw his son leading Neptune out of his box, and the doctor's dog following at his heels.

The horse seemed to place implicit confidence in his young guide, and walked sedately and quietly.

'You would never think Neptune had such a deuce of a temper to look at him now,' said Jim.

CHAPTER XIII

SPECULATION

NEVER had there been such excitement over the Swamp Creek Cup. The stake was good, as country stakes go, and in addition to this a splendid entry had been obtained, and Dr Tom prophesied that at least fourteen or fifteen runners would face him when he held the flag, for in addition to being secretary, stake holder and general manager, the doctor was also the starter.

It spoke well for his reputation for fairness that he gave universal satisfaction in these various departments, and had he been able to get back from the starting post in time, he would undoubtedly have been appointed judge.

The local bookmaker at Swamp Creek had already commenced operations, and a horse from Bourke named First Class was favourite. This worthy penciller owned the Gum Tree Hotel, and his name was Aaron Hyam. He was of the persuasion indicated by his Christian name, and as his eldest son and clerk was called Moses, there was no reason to doubt it when he said if ever he

had a daughter, or rather his wife had, he should call her Rachel.

Aaron Hyam was a well-to-do man. Old Ned Glenn, the coach driver, said Aaron had made his money mainly through his good offices, because he invariably persuaded passengers to stop at the Gum Tree Hotel.

'The money I have put into that man's pocket would keep me comfortably for life,' he growled; 'and the mean son of Jerusalem has never had the decency to tip me more than a fiver.'

Aaron Hyam's hotel was the resort of the Swamp Creek folk and the whole of the better-class people for many miles around. It was quite a different place from Potter's Shanty, and for a country hotel was respectably kept even in those rough and often lawless times.

The astute Aaron worked his cards well and was in good odour even with such men as Dalton's gang. He likewise kept well in with the police, and Sergeant Machinson was a supporter of his.

A fortnight before the race for the Swamp Creek Cup, two or three bookmakers from Bathurst, Bourke and Orange arrived in the place and put up at Hyam's hotel.

Aaron would have preferred to have the manipulating of the market to himself, but as he could not very well do this, he had to remain contented with fleecing the visitors to his hotel as best he might.

One of these bookmakers was a friend of the

owner of First Class, and he remonstrated with Aaron for making that animal favourite.

'He's never done much, only won a bit of a handicap at Bathurst,' said Price James, the friend of the owner. 'What do you make him favourite for?'

'That's my business,' said Aaron. 'If you care to lay longer odds, do so. Four to one is quite enough for me to lay against a horse like First Class amongst our lot. Why, his name gives him away at once! Had you called him Third Class, or No Class, it would have been different, but First Class—well, four to one is a very fair price against a horse with such a name.'

Rodney Shaw had two horses entered, both by Seahorse. They were named Seaweed and Distant Shore, and he fancied one of them would win.

When Ben Madsley heard from Jim Dennis that he was going to let his son Willie ride Neptune he laughed, and thought to himself,—

'I'll frighten the life out of the youngster before the flag falls.'

Rodney Shaw engaged the jockey to ride the better of his pair, and gave him his choice.

After a trial at Cudgegong, Ben Madsley selected Distant Shore as his mount, and the horse certainly galloped remarkably well.

No sooner did it become known that Jim Dennis had decided to put his son up, when long odds, comparatively speaking, were offered against Neptune in the betting.

Aaron Hyam thought this was a particularly good chance of making a bit without much risk, and when anyone wished to back Neptune he was always ready to lay a fair price.

In the meantime Jim Dennis was taking every care to have his horse fit and thoroughly wound up to go two miles. There was no pampering about Jim's method of treatment. Plenty of fresh air and exercise was his motto, and he trusted more to nature than art.

Neptune was given plenty of long, strong, steady work. He was not galloped at racing speed over a mile one day and then cantered for the next two or three days.

Willie Dennis rode the horse two-mile gallops at an even pace, and the work Neptune did suited him. As for Willie, he never felt happier or more elated than when he was on the back of his father's horse. Jim Dennis was proud of the lad, and gave him every encouragement. Day by day he saw the horse become better and better, and he knew that on the eventful date Neptune would be as hard as nails.

Rodney Shaw was very anxious to win the race, and now he had secured the services of Madsley he was sanguine of success. At the same time, he had a wholesome dread of Neptune, but consoled himself with the thought that Willie Dennis would hardly be able to do the horse justice.

Although Abe Dalton was regarded as an outlaw

and a sort of social pariah, Dr Tom and the committee of the race club thought they could not exclude his entries from the races.

Dalton had done some desperate deeds in his time, but since his illness he seemed to have changed for the better.

'It will not last long. He is certain to break out again,' said Dr Tom, and he was right.

Abe Dalton entered a half-bred horse called The Captain for the cup, and two others in minor races.

No one knew much about The Captain, and when it came to handicapping him there was a difficulty.

The committee did the work of adjusting the weights, and great arguments they had over it at Dr Tom's house.

'If we accept Dalton's entries, as I take it we must, his horses shall be fairly weighted,' said the doctor.

'How can we weight a horse we know nothing about?' said the chairman. 'I say, give The Captain top weight, and if Abe Dalton does not like it let him do the other thing.'

'But The Captain is only a three-year-old. We ought not to give him top weight,' said the doctor.

'Some horses are better at three years than at any other age,' was the reply.

'The lowest weight is to be seven stone,' said Dr Tom; 'and I think if we say nine stone seven for top weight that will leave a sufficient margin.'

There was a lot of wrangling over the matter, but eventually First Class was weighted at nine stone

seven, and The Captain put on the same mark with Rodney Shaw's horses and Neptune, who were all to carry eight stone seven.

These comprised the first division, and the tail end were in the seven-stone list.

Considering the committee knew very little about some of the horses entered, the general opinion was that their work was well done, and Aaron Hyam soon found his book would be profitable, as most of the runners were backed.

Despite his weight, First Class, who was a fair public performer in the district, was favourite. Abe Dalton's horse was well backed by several members of his gang, who came into Swamp Creek for the purpose.

Rodney Shaw backed both his horses, Distant Shore for the most money, but Neptune was almost out in the cold, as Jim Dennis was contented to run for the stake and a few modest wagers.

Dr Tom was most enthusiastic, and went about the Creek, followed by Baalim, with an air of importance, as though greatness had been suddenly and unexpectedly thrust upon him.

A night or two before the day of the races the crowd at the Gum Tree Hotel was large, and Aaron Hyam was doing a brisk business both at the bar and with his book.

Abe Dalton had ridden in from Barker's Creek, and as he was somewhat the worse for liquor there

was every prospect of a row, for he was a quarrelsome fellow when in this state.

'I wish he'd go,' thought Aaron Hyam to himself, but dared not say anything to him.

Dalton was swaggering about his horse, and swore he would beat anything 'in these parts.' He offered to back The Captain against any other horse in the race for a hundred.

'Come, some of you fellows. Have you no pluck?' he said. 'He's only a three-year-old, but he'll beat the whole blooming lot.'

Dr Tom was in the bar and said quietly,—

'I'll bet you a score I name one to beat The Captain.'

'Bravo, doctor! Don't let him have it all his own way.'

'Done with you,' said Dalton. 'Name it.'

'Neptune,' said Dr Tom. 'How will that suit you?'

Abe Dalton gave a coarse laugh as he replied,—

'That will suit me very well. You've not much chance of landing that score with a little brat like young Dennis up.'

'You had better not let Jim Dennis hear you call his son a brat,' said Aaron Hyam.

'And why not? Who is Jim Dennis that I should be afraid of him?'

'He's more than a match for you and your crew,' said one.

'Is he?' sneered Dalton.

'He's proved it.'

'Has he?'

'Yes, and he'll prove it again if you ruffle him about his son.'

Abe Dalton swore, and looking at the speaker said,—

'I'll say what I like about Jim Dennis, or any other man; and as for that lad, why, he's only a half-caste. Ask black Sal if he isn't.'

Abe Dalton suddenly felt a pressure at the back of his neck, and he was swung round as though he had been on a pivot.

'You say that again, you cur, and I'll smash your face in!' said Dr Tom. 'If Jim Dennis heard you he'd screw your head off. Get away from me. You are not fit to touch!' and Dr Tom flung Dalton against the side of the bar, where he had to clutch at the railing to prevent himself falling.

There was a chorus of approval from those present, for Abe Dalton was hated as much as Dr Tom and Jim Dennis were liked.

A row seemed imminent, when Dr Tom said,—

'If he wants a fight he can have it, and I'm the man to take him on.'

Abe Dalton had no desire to tackle the doctor, and he growled,—

'If you hadn't saved my life I'd throttle you.'

Dr Tom laughed as he replied,—

'Don't let that trifle stand in your way. Come and try!'

'Let him alone, doctor. He's not worth troubling about,' whispered Aaron Hyam.

'I think you are right,' was the doctor's reply. Then, turning to Abe Dalton, he said,—

'I have offered to bet you twenty pounds Neptune beats The Captain, and I'll not go back on my word; but, mind you, if I win I will not touch your money. Aaron Hyam shall send it to the Bathurst Hospital,' and the doctor stalked out of the place amidst a volley of cheers.

CHAPTER XIV

THE HALF-CASTE'S WARNING

JIM DENNIS heard of the row at the Gum Tree Hotel, and he also heard of the cause.

Ned Glenn, who happened to be there, told him all about it when he pulled up at Wanabeen.

'You'd have laughed, Jim, to see the funk Dalton was in,' he said. 'I never saw such a blooming coward in my life. He's not fit to sew a button on his own shirt. He cowed down before the doc like a whipped kangaroo dog, and darn me if he even so much as swore when Dr Tom asked him out to fight.'

'But what was it all about?' asked Jim.

Then the story came out, with embellishments by Ned Glenn.

'And Abe Dalton said that about my lad?' said Jim.

'Yes, he did; but I wish I had never mentioned it; you look so ferocious.'

'You wait until I come across Dalton. He'll have to answer for it.'

'Leave him alone,' said Ned. 'Treat him as Dr Tom treated him. Let him slide.'

'And so it was Dr Tom who stuck up for me and mine,' said Jim.

'Didn't I tell you so?' exclaimed Ned; 'and I can tell you a bit more. It's through Dr Tom you have not been molested by Dalton's gang for the past few years. Don't you know the yarn? Why, every man in the Creek knows it.'

Jim Dennis said, 'You're—sure—it's—true?' He caught up his few words, and they seemed to stumble over each other.

'Certain. Gospel. I had it from Abe himself. It happened this way: Dalton was dying, and Dr Tom was called in under false pretences. Some blackguard of the gang told him a woman and child were dying. You know what the doc is in such cases. Well, he went. He drove out in that wretched ramshackle of his and he pulled up at headquarters—Abe Dalton's.

'All he heard in answer to his call was groans. He went inside—he's told this to me himself. He don't often give much away in that way do the doc, but he opened his big heart and let me have it; and, by gosh, as you know, Jim, I'm a good receptacle for news.'

Jim nodded; he was taking it all in—and a lot more.

'So the doctor did what?'

Ungrammatical, but it is what Jim said, and I have to record it. We are not all born grammarians.

'The doc did this for you, Jim, but don't let on or split to him, or he'd knock the life out of me. The doc says to Abe Dalton. "You're going to die, old man, and your sins will provide the fuel to roast you." From all accounts—there is only one account, but the doc gets a bit confused when he's on this track—the fact of the matter is that Abe Dalton was in a very bad state. Tom—I mean the doc—pulled him through on one condition; that condition was that you were not to be molested, or your belongings, for ever more.'

'And Dr Tom compounded'—it was a big word for Jim—'with a brute like Dalton? He saved his life at the price of shielding me from this gang? Wait until I see the doctor. I'll tackle him over this.'

'I'm going,' said Ned.

'About time,' answered Jim. 'I'll tell that story of yours to the little chap.'

'Don't. By gosh, Jim, don't,' said Ned, as he got to his horses' heads.

'I will. He ought to know black Sal, eh? Good-bye, Ned.'

Ned Glenn was on the box seat. He looked round at Jim, cracked the whip over his team's ears, and said,—

'I'll be back in time for the cup, my lad, and if Willie don't win on Neptune, s'help me, I'll chuck up the job.'

Jim Dennis's face cleared. The passing cloud had

drifted. The gloom was dispelled at the mention of the child. What little things, what small words, what rightly-spoken words can change a man's heart.

'Bah!'

It was an emphatic expression. Jim Dennis spat on the verandah, he kicked a chair over, he swung the hammock round and went inside.

'Sal, do you know what they have said about you? Do you know what Abe Dalton says?'

She shuddered.

'Sal, you have been a mother to my lad.'

She remained silent.

'Do you know what that scoundrel Dalton says?'

'No.'

'That Willie is your child.'

A wail came from her, a piteous, heart-rending wail. She fell on her knees at his feet. She put her head on his boots, and she cried—cried many bitter tears. It was hard for her. She loved this white man, the man who had helped her, had come into her life, picked her up when she was dying, starving, her tongue cleaving to her mouth from thirst, on his verandah steps. He was not a missionary, he never talked to her about God—and the devil. He never frightened her with unknown terrors, he had been good and kind and gentle to her, and they said these things about him!

She thought not of herself, her whole thoughts were for him, the man who had protected her.

'Willie, Willie!' she wailed.

She wished he belonged to her, that he were flesh of her flesh. She craved for that child as mothers crave for their own.

'Get up, Sal. I thought you ought to know,' he said.

She lifted her face to his, and the tears were streaming down her half-black cheeks.

'You have been more mother to Willie than his own,' he said.

With the quick motion always noticeable in the black races, she rose to her feet. She went to the door.

He watched her with wondering eyes.

She came back, caught him by the arm and peered into his face.

'You have a bad friend,' she said.

'Only one,' said Jim, with a smile, as he patted her on the head much as he would a dog.

She glanced to the right and then to the left.

'Do you know his name?' she said.

'Yes, Abe Dalton.'

She laughed, and he started.

'Abe Dalton!' she exclaimed. 'No! what has he to do with you? My people can guard you from him. It is not Dalton; it is—' she hesitated.

'Name him,' said Jim.

'Rodney Shaw!' she said.

He caught her by the wrist. He had met with

treachery in black blood before, and he half mistrusted her.

'What do you mean?'

She looked frightened.

His grip tightened.

'What do you mean?' he asked again.

'I am afraid of him, afraid for you, for myself, for Willie,' she said in a low voice.

'Some of your legends,' he answered roughly. 'You blacks are all alike, half-brutal, half-beast.'

She shrank from him. They were the hardest words he had ever said to her.

'I'm sorry, Sal. I forgot myself. Tell me what you mean.'

'You know the legend of our tribe,' she said. 'No white man's blood shall mingle with our own unless calamity—I was taught that word—befall us.'

'Tell me the story, I forget it,' said Jim, as he sat down.

'This is as it was told to me by King Charlie, the chief of our tribe. He rose from his meal and stood up alone, solemn, in the moonlight.'

Sal had posed for this effect, and Jim took it all in—but it was a genuine pose, which is not the case with *poseurs* of the present day.

'He had eaten kangaroo and wallaby, and had supped well. You have seen King Charlie. True, he is only a black, but he has not the white man's curse upon him.'

Jim Dennis knew Sal in these moods, when the savage was uppermost.

'He looked upon me—I can see him now—a gaunt figure with the chain around his neck and the half-moon badge of his tribe on his chest. His hand was slowly raised, and he pointed at me. I will not give you the words of our tribe, it would be shame unto me, but I will tell you what he said.'

She raised herself to her full height.

'"You are cursed!" I can hear the words now. They hissed through my ears like a sound of running water at flood. "You are cursed!" Again he said it, and I shrank from him. What had I done, what fearful deed had I committed that I should be cursed?

'It was my mother's sin, not mine, and yet not hers. She was taken as a slave might be taken—and I was begot.

'"You are cursed!" It rang in my ears, it rings now. I can see the old king of our tribe rise up and cast me out.'

Jim Dennis watched her; he had never seen Sal in quite this mood before. She looked like a prophetess.

'And when he cast me out what did I reply? I defied him. I said the sin of my mother ought not to be visited upon me. I said that the white man's hand was strong in the land, and that *he* ought to suffer for his sins, not the poor "gin" that succumbed to him.

'I know King Charlie. He is a just man and

good. He has dreamed the dream of our race, and he has wonderful visionary powers. But because he cursed me I left the camp and wandered forth. I was weary and I fell—you know where I fell—on the steps there, and you took me in as you would a little child, and saved me.

'Rodney Shaw is your enemy—he is mine,' she went on. 'He has tempted me and I have urged him on.'

'You have?' said Jim.

'Yes, and why? I have tried him and tested him. He desires me. He says I am to him more than all his stations and cattle. But why does he say that? He is your friend. And they say—Abe Dalton says—I am the mother of your child. They lie—and we know it.'

He tried to calm her.

'But where is the danger to me, Sal? You must be mistaken,' he said.

'Shaw hates you. There is something in him I do not understand,' said Sal.

'Never mind, my girl, we can get level with Rodney Shaw any day. I'm just commencing to find things out,' said Jim.

CHAPTER XV

A COWARDLY ASSAULT

AT first Jim could hardly credit Sal's statement, but several things that had happened of late caused him to place credence in her words. Moreover, he knew she was truthful and would not deceive him.

He consulted Dr Tom, and that worthy man agreed with Sal; he had no special liking for Rodney Shaw. Constable Doonan had noticed Rodney Shaw coming from the direction of Barker's Creek on several occasions, and wondered what he had been doing in that quarter. Jim Dennis meant to have an explanation from the owner of Cudgegong; he did not mean to allow Rodney Shaw, or any other man, to insult Sal, or to prowl around his place during his absence. When the races were over he would have more time on his hands, and meant to inquire into these matters. He had no desire to quarrel with anyone before the cup was decided, because it might possibly put obstacles in the way of Neptune winning. The horse had been well tried, and had done a capital preparation, and Willie seemed to handle him with the skill of an old hand. The lad

was confident of winning, and when he saw the new yellow jacket his father had purchased for him he was delighted.

This jacket had been specially made in Sydney, and arrived in charge of Ned Glenn. 'There you are, Willie,' said Ned, as he handed him the parcel. 'You will find something in there that will please you, I reckon.'

Jim Dennis, Sal and Ned Glenn eyed the lad admiringly when he put the yellow jacket on, and he looked well in it, quite a model of a youthful jockey.

The day before the races Jim Dennis with his son and Neptune rode over to Swamp Creek and put up at the Gum Tree Hotel.

There was quite a crowd around the place waiting for the horse to arrive, and the comments passed on the appearance of Neptune were on the whole favourable.

There was a lot of wagering at night at the hotel, and, the township being full of visitors, many strangers were present.

Jim Dennis had taken special precautions that his horse should be well looked after, and Dr Tom's black boy was left on guard with strict injunctions not to leave the door of the box on any pretext whatever. There he sat like a black sentinel with old Baalim at his side, and the pair kept off all inquiring visitors.

Jim Dennis knew that Abe Dalton was bent upon

winning the race with The Captain, and would not stick at a trifle to accomplish the end. Most of the horses were backed, and there was every prospect of an exciting race. Willie was at Dr Tom's house and was to remain there for the night.

'He's better there than in the hotel. You never can tell what fellows like Dalton may get up to,' said the doctor, as he and Jim went round to the Gum Tree to see how the wagering was going.

The place was packed, and Aaron Hyam was doing a brisk trade behind the bar and also with his bookmaking. First Class was a hot favourite at three to one, and seemed likely to see a much shorter price.

Rodney Shaw was present, and backed Distant Shore freely, and offered to back his horse for a hundred against any one of the runners.

Jim Dennis had not met him since Sal had warned him that the master of Cudgegong was no friend of his. In his straightforward way Jim would have had it out with him there and then, but Dr Tom counselled patience, and Jim knew his advice was good. Shaw came up to them in a friendly way, and was evidently unaware that Sal had reported his misconduct or expressed any doubt about him.

He had been indulging somewhat freely and was in a boisterous mood.

'Now then, Dennis, I'll give you a chance,' he said. 'No one else seems willing to take it on.

I'll bet you a level hundred, or any part of it, that Distant Shore beats Neptune.'

'Considering the odds, you ought to lay me a hundred to fifty,' said Jim. 'You have Madsley riding, and my lad has not his experience.'

'I'm not particular,' said Shaw. 'I'll bet you a hundred to fifty if you like that Distant Shore beats your horse.'

'Very well, it's a wager,' said Jim.

'I'll lay you a hundred to ten against Neptune,' said Aaron Hyam.

'That will suit me,' replied Jim.

'I'll take that too,' said Dr Tom.

The people crowded round them, and there was a lot of jostling and pushing in a good-humoured way.

Abe Dalton was there, but wisely kept in the background. He had no desire to risk an encounter with Jim Dennis.

Dalton would have given a good deal to ensure Neptune being beaten, and when he saw Dr Tom and Jim together it occurred to him that Willie Dennis was probably alone at the doctor's house.

He went out at the back and quickly made his way in that direction. He had no very distinct idea what he intended doing, but he was determined Willie Dennis must be incapacitated from riding.

'If the lad can't ride Neptune,' said Dalton, 'the horse will not run, because he won't be able to find another jockey.'

He had not forgotten his oath to Dr Tom, but he had kept it so long that he felt absolved from it, and to a man like Dalton oaths do not count for much.

He went stealthily as he neared the house, and, cautiously treading up the steps on to the verandah, he looked in at the open door.

Willie Dennis was asleep in a cane chair, and Abe Dalton, creeping round, saw one of the doctor's pestles, which he used for pounding various things in a mortar. He picked it up, and then, approaching the lad from behind, hit him a violent blow on the head.

Willie fell forward out of the chair, face downwards, on to the floor.

Abe Dalton rolled him over, and, looking at him, said to himself,—

'He'll get over it all right, but I reckon it's settled him for to-morrow.'

He put the pestle back in its place, and quickly leaving the house hurried back to the Gum Tree Hotel.

Constable Doonan happened to meet him, and Abe Dalton could not avoid him.

'You are in a hurry,' said Doonan. 'Going to back The Captain, I suppose?'

'Yes,' said Dalton, 'and I'd advise you to do the same.'

'I shall have my bit on Neptune,' said Doonan. 'I want to see young Willie Dennis win the cup.'

'He'll not win it,' said Dalton. 'He's had no experience. Take my tip and put your bit on The Captain,' and he went on his way towards the hotel.

'He'll not know where I have been,' said Dalton to himself. 'Lucky he did not meet me near the doctor's place or he might have suspected something.'

The hotel was still full, and Dalton again backed his horse with two or three bookmakers.

'You seem pretty sanguine of winning,' said Shaw to him.

'Yes, I am. He's a good horse.'

'I think mine will beat you, but I don't much care what wins if Neptune is out of it.'

'You seem to have a "down" on Dennis lately.'

'He's a precious sight too good for this world,' said Rodney Shaw. 'Thinks such a mighty lot of himself. I'll tell you what, Abe Dalton, I've a piece of work for you to do, if you care to undertake it. It will be a risky job, but you are accustomed to take risks, and I am accustomed to having my own way.'

'What is it?' asked Dalton. 'We can't talk here.'

They went out at the back, and Rodney Shaw said in a low voice,—

'I want that half-caste woman of Jim Dennis's. Can you get her for me? I'll give you a stiff price.'

Abe Dalton laughed as he said, 'She's not worth taking any risks about.'

'Oh, yes, she is, and I have taken a fancy to her. Can you get her?'

'Of course it could be done, but there would be the deuce to pay about it. Besides, you couldn't keep her when you had her. She would go back, and as likely as not Jim Dennis would shoot you or burn your place over your head.'

'I'll risk all that. Can you get her? Your gang ought to be able to manage it.'

'It's a difficult job, but it could be done. What's your price?'

'A hundred pounds when she is brought to my house,' said Shaw.

'I'll think it over and let you know, but you are a fool for your pains. Fancy risking so much for a black gin.'

'She is not a black gin, she is a very fine woman,' said Shaw.

Abe Dalton shrugged his shoulders and looked at the speaker with undisguised contempt, which was, however, lost upon him.

'Is it a bargain?' asked Rodney Shaw.

'I'll do my best. Money down, mind you, and you take all the blame,' said Dalton.

'Agreed,' said Rodney Shaw; 'and the sooner you kidnap her the better.'

'A little bit of "blackbirding" ashore,' laughed Dalton, and Shaw joined him in his mirth.

When Dr Tom and Jim Dennis had seen Neptune safely locked up for the night, with the black fellow inside his box, they walked home together.

'Willie's asleep,' said Jim, as he saw him lying on the floor.

'Funny little chap. Why didn't he lie on the couch?' said Dr Tom; then, with his practised eyes, he noticed how still and unnaturally calm the lad was. He stooped over him and gave an exclamation of surprise, with a tone of alarm in it.

Jim Dennis was down on his knees beside the boy in a moment.

'He must have fainted and fallen out of his chair,' said Dr Tom, picking him up and placing him on the sofa.

Jim Dennis was in an agony of fear. He seemed utterly helpless. Dr Tom felt Willie's head, and found a lump at the back where he had been struck with the pestle.

'Jim, he's been hit on the head, and a heavy blow it must have been. Keep quiet and I'll soon pull him round.'

Jim Dennis looked on half dazed. He could not realise what had happened.

In a short time, under Dr Tom's treatment, Willie came round, and, opening his eyes, looked about him.

'Oh, my head,' he said faintly, and seemed on the verge of going off again.

The blow was severe, but not so serious as might have been expected.

When he had recovered sufficiently, they questioned him as to what had happened, but he knew nothing about it, or how he had been struck.

'I went to sleep in the chair, and I remember nothing more,' said Willie.

'There's been some dirty work here,' said Jim. 'Let me find out who has done it, that's all.'

'Shall I be able to ride to-morrow?' asked Willie. 'My head seems to go round and round. Oh, I do hope I shall be able to ride Neptune.'

'Don't worry about that, Willie,' said his father.

'After a good night's rest you will feel better,' said Dr Tom. 'I think you will be able to ride. I'll fix you up with a good nerve tonic in the morning.'

Willie smiled faintly; his head was very painful and ached badly.

He was put to bed and a sleeping-draught given him; after which he rested peacefully.

'We must get to the bottom of this business,' said Jim. 'I should not wonder if Dalton had a hand in it. He'll find he has gone a step too far if I can sheet it home to him.'

'That blow might have killed him,' said Dr Tom. 'It must have been a heavy weapon he was struck with.'

'Is there any danger?' asked Jim, anxiously.

'No, you can rest assured of it; but the little chap has had a narrow escape,' said the doctor.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MORNING OF THE RACE

THE lad passed a peaceful night, but it was an anxious time for Jim Dennis and Dr Tom when he awoke next morning. They had money at stake, but it counted for little. Willie's health was far more to them than any paltry wagers. They were very much afraid he would not be fit to ride, and they knew how the lad would feel about it, and how jubilant certain people would be over the mishap.

Willie, however, was much better than Dr Tom expected.

The sleeping-draught and the night's rest had pulled him together wonderfully, and, although he staggered and for a few moments seemed dazed when he got out of bed, he soon recovered.

'I shall be all right in an hour or two,' he said. 'My head still swims, but one of Dr Tom's tonics will soon pull me round. I am going to ride Neptune and win on him.'

'Bravo, laddie!' said Dr Tom. 'There's pluck for you, Jim.'

'Have you no idea how this happened?' asked his father.

'No. I did not even feel the blow,' said the lad.

'I'll stroll round to the Gum Tree,' said Jim, 'and perhaps I may pick up some information there.'

'As you please,' said Dr Tom. 'Only don't forget this, keep your head cool and your temper well in hand. I will look after Willie.'

Although it was early, the people were already astir, for a great day was before them. Jim Dennis went round to Neptune's box and found the horse all right, and Dr Tom's black fellow had been true to his trust.

Neptune looked a picture of health and was as fit as his master knew how to make him. The horse had not been pampered, but had received a genuine preparation, and had done enough work to break the average modern thoroughbred down completely. Having satisfied himself all was right with Neptune, Jim Dennis went into the hotel. Business was already brisk, and visitors were arriving every few minutes.

Adye Dauntsey, the police magistrate at Barragong, had arrived, and he dearly loved a good race. He was partial to Jim Dennis and a great friend of Dr Tom's.

Sergeant Machinson was there with several constables, to keep order, but he was not popular at

Swamp Creek, and the inhabitants were not slow in showing their likes and dislikes.

Adye Dauntsey saw Jim Dennis, and, going up to him, shook hands with him heartily. This caused Sergeant Machinson to scowl and mutter to himself,—

'There's not much chance for a man in my position when the P.M. is hand and glove with a fellow like Dennis.'

'Well, Dennis, what chance have you to-day? I hear Neptune is a bit out of the common, and that the cup will go to Wanabeen.'

'I hope it will,' said Jim.

'Your son rides, does he not? Qui a little chap?' asked Dauntsey.

'He's only twelve, but he's a rare boy on a horse. I think you'll say he is a wonder after the race,' said Jim.

Abe Dalton was hanging around, and, hearing this remark, smiled to himself as he thought, 'He's trying to hide it. He knows well enough his lad won't be able to ride. Perhaps he wants to hedge his money.'

'I have never seen so many people at Swamp Creek races before,' said Dauntsey. 'Dr Tom has worked the handicapping well; he deserves every credit for it.'

'Everything the doctor takes in hand he does well,' said Jim.

'You are right there. Where is he?'

'At his house. I am going there. Will you walk with me? My son is staying there.'

'With pleasure,' said the P.M., and they went out together.

'I say, Aaron,' said Abe Dalton when they had gone, 'how do you stand against my horse?'

'Badly, but he'll not win. I'm going for Neptune, although I have laid some wagers against him to oblige customers,' replied Hyam.

'I'll bet you a hundred The Captain beats him,' said Dalton.

'No,' replied Aaron, 'I will not make that wager; it spoils my book.'

'Come, I'll lay you a hundred to fifty my horse beats him,' said Dalton.

'You seem pretty sure of a win,' was Aaron's response. 'I'll take that wager.'

'All in, run or not?' said Abe.

Aaron laughed as he replied, 'As you please; but there's not much fear about Neptune being a non-starter.'

'You never can tell until the numbers go up,' said Dalton; 'and Jim Dennis is a curious fellow.'

'But he does not do dirty tricks like that,' said Aaron Hyam. He was about to add, 'It's more in your line,' but checked himself in time.

'That's your opinion, it is not mine,' was the reply of Abe Dalton.

Dr Tom was pleased to see Adye Dauntsey, and

the good-humoured magistrate was equally delighted to again meet the doctor.

'You are quite a stranger at Barragong,' he said. 'We very seldom see you there.'

'I have so much to do here,' said the doctor, smiling; 'but I mean to trespass upon your hospitality some day before long.'

'And you may be sure of a hearty welcome,' said Dauntsey. 'Is this the young jockey who will ride Neptune?' he added, as he patted Willie on the head.

The lad shrunk from his hand, for his head was still painful.

Adye Dauntsey looked, up surprised. Jim Dennis hastened to explain.

When Adye Dauntsey heard what had happened the night previously he looked severe.

'This must be inquired into,' he said; 'but you were quite right to wait until after the races. I should not be at all surprised if that scoundrel Dalton had a hand in it. I think you made a mistake, doctor, in allowing him to run horses at the meeting.'

'I could not very well prevent him, and it might have caused an unpleasant scene.'

'But he's such an out-and-out bad lot.'

'He is, I'll grant you that.'

'Why does not Sergeant Machinson lay him by the heels?' asked the doctor.

'That is a question I have frequently asked myself,' said the magistrate. 'You see, Machinson holds a very responsible position and works a large district,

and so far as I know does his duty, but I have often thought he ought to pay a little more attention to Barker's Creek and its inhabitants.'

'And you are quite right too,' said Jim Dennis. 'If you knew all Machinson's little games he would not be sergeant in your district long.'

Adye Dauntsey looked grave. He had his doubts about the sergeant's integrity himself, but it was a difficult case to inquire into. If he made a mistake there would be nothing for him to do but to resign his position. He must be very sure before he moved.

'One thing I must do,' he said, 'I will instruct Machinson to inquire into this assault upon your son, Dennis; and I shall expect him to find out the culprit.'

'That he will not do,' was Jim's answer.

'Why?'

'Because I firmly believe Dalton had a hand in it.'

'And why should it prevent him from doing his duty?' asked Adye.

'That is best known to himself. Machinson has never been fair to me. He still believes, or professes to do so, that I had a hand in that Potter affair, and he circulated a rumour at the time that I was responsible for the Seahorse business.'

'No one believes it, Dennis,' said Dauntsey.

'I am glad to hear you say so again,' said Jim; 'but it sticks, after all these years. There is

trouble brewing again around here, let me tell you. Seth Sharp has been at Barker's Creek ever since his discharge from prison. They ought to have hanged him.'

'Seth Sharp at Barker's Creek!' exclaimed both Dr Tom and Adye Dauntsey. 'Surely you don't mean that?'

'I'll swear I saw him last week, and where should he be located around here if not at Barker's Creek?'

'That man's a murderer,' said Adye Dauntsey. 'How he got off with only fifteen years the lord only knows. How quickly time flies. Are you quite sure, Jim, you have made no mistake?'

'Certain. I know him. Haven't I fought him and beaten him? The look he gave me as we passed each other was quite enough.'

'This shall be attended to,' said Dauntsey. 'Machinson must inquire into it. He cannot know anything about it.'

'He ought to,' said Jim. 'It is more his business than mine.'

There was a shout outside, and Dr Tom went to the door.

'Come in, Shaw,' he said.

Rodney Shaw entered the room and, after greeting them, said—

'What's up with the jockey? He does not look very well.'

'No, and you would not look any better if you had had a crack on the head last night,' blurted out Jim.

'Was he hurt? Who did it?' asked Shaw.

'That's what I would like to find out,' said Jim.

'Will he be able to ride?' asked Shaw, anxiously.

'Yes,' said Willie, 'and win too.'

Rodney Shaw laughed.

'Don't be too sure, my lad. You have Distant Shore to beat, and The Captain, and a dozen more.'

'And I shall beat them all. It is my first race, and I am going to win it.'

Dr Tom had seen Rodney Shaw several times, but did not know him well. Something in his voice seemed to recall memories. He had only been to Cudgegong three or four times, and had never seen much of the owner of that station. 'Where the deuce have I met him, years ago?' thought Dr Tom.

Of course it could only be fancy, he knew that, but still he could not get rid of the idea that Rodney Shaw was a man he had known in days gone by.

'You think Distant Shore will win?' asked Adye Dauntsey.

'Yes. With Madsley up, I have a really good chance.'

'It promises to be a most interesting race,' said Dr Tom.

'The handicap is not bad considering the committee framed it,' said Shaw.

'I think they have done their work well,' said

the doctor. 'Do you think it could have been improved upon?'

'Oh, no, I would not suggest that for a moment,' said Rodney Shaw. He was looking hard at Willie, who sat very still with his hands fixed firmly one on each arm of his chair.

'He'll ride but he'll never win,' was Rodney Shaw's inward comment. 'He must be a plucky little chap'—this he thought grudgingly.

CHAPTER XVII

AT THE POST

SWAMP CREEK race-course was not an attractive place, nor was it an ideal ground for the purpose. The track was somewhat uneven, and only a mile round, so that for the cup race the horses had to compass it twice. It was, however, a track that gave the people a good chance of seeing every part of the race, and they could thus watch the struggle with the keenest interest.

At a comparatively early hour the course was crowded with a large number of vehicles of all descriptions, from the smart buggy to the more humble ramshackle which hardly seemed capable of holding together. There was an improvised ring, but no stand, and in these railed-off enclosures the bulk of the wagering took place.

The first two races were not of much interest, and as Abe Dalton won one he was sanguine of The Captain taking the cup. The bulk of the people present would have been sorely disappointed had The Captain won, for Abe Dalton's character was well known, and he was decidedly unpopular and looked askance upon by honest folk.

Half an hour before the cup race the scene was animated, not to say picturesque, and the excitement was worked up to fever pitch. There were fourteen runners, and each horse had followers who backed their fancy freely. Aaron Hyam was busy pencilling wagers down almost as fast as he could write, and his son, with numerous assistants, was equally busy at the booth; so it was evident the host of the Gum Tree Hotel was in for a good day. He avoided laying much against Neptune, and was standing Jim Dennis's horse to win a good stake.

Abe Dalton was anxious about Willie Dennis, and he was surprised when he saw him on the course, apparently sound and well and very little the worse for the cowardly attack made upon him.

Considering it was a country meeting, the horses running for the cup were a credit to the district. It was a genuine sporting affair, and the rivalry was keen, and each runner might be depended upon to do its best. The difficulty was in procuring riders, and some of them were not likely to make a brilliant display in the saddle. Still, they all meant to win if possible, which is not always the case at more fashionable gatherings.

When Willie Dennis donned his new yellow jacket and red cap he felt proud, and walked about the ring with an amusing air of importance which did not ill become him. His head still ached and at times he felt faint, but he pulled himself together and shook it off, for he knew he must have all his wits about

him to win the cup on Neptune. Many curious and inquiring glances followed him, and the ladies smiled upon him, and said he was 'a dear little fellow, and so good-looking.'

Sal was there, but she kept away from the crowd, and her anxiety to see Willie win was almost painful. She knew nothing of the attack made upon him the night before or she would have been still more anxious. She never doubted that he would win, but she wished the race was over.

'How do you feel now, my lad?' said Adye Dauntsey, putting his hand on Willie's shoulder.

'Much better; a little dizzy at times, but it soon passes off. I hope I shall be all right in the race, at anyrate I shall try my best.'

'I hope you will win,' said Adye Dauntsey, 'both for your own sake and your father's.'

'I think I shall,' he replied. 'Have you backed Neptune?'

'Yes, I have a fiver on with Hyam, but he would not lay me more than six to one.'

'Which horse is favourite?' asked Willie.

'I should say Distant Shore is as good a favourite as anything,' said Adye Dauntsey; 'and The Captain is second favourite. There are a lot of them backed, such as Wamba, Wattle Tree, Dingo, Reindeer and Scamp, and some people have been tempted by the long odds to put a few pounds on Seaweed, Mr Shaw's second

string. I suppose he will make the running for Distant Shore. You must not let him steal a march on you and get too far ahead; there's many a race lost in that way.'

'I'll take good care of that,' said Willie, smiling. 'I know Neptune can stay every yard of the two miles, so I shall not hesitate to make good use of him.'

Ben Madsley came up wearing the green jacket and white cap, which were Rodney Shaw's first colours, a black cap denoting which was the second string.

'Well, youngster, do you fancy yourself for this race? I think I shall beat you. Your father ought to have let me ride Neptune; it would have been a good thing then.'

'It is not a bad thing now,' said Willie; 'and I know how to ride the horse, and he understands me. You'll find we shall be thereabouts at the finish.'

'You have never ridden in a race before,' said Madsley, 'so you don't know what it's like. All I can say is that, if you win, you are a bit of a wonder.'

'I hope I am,' said the lad, smiling, and Ben Madsley could not help laughing at him.

A jockey named Jackson was riding The Captain, and carried the black jacket of Abe Dalton.

Jackson had not a very good reputation, and on more than one occasion there was suspicion of foul riding connected with some of his work.

Abe Dalton had promised him a good round sum if he won, and had told him he must lose no chances, and if there were any risks to take them.

'Remember I want to win,' said Dalton. 'Never mind the other beggars; if you can jostle one or two of them out of it, so much the better.'

'I am not a nervous chap,' said Jackson, 'and I can take a risk as well as any man, you know that.'

'I have seen you do some fairly sharp bits of work,' said Dalton; 'but you have, so far, been lucky enough to steer clear of trouble.'

Jim Dennis had saddled Neptune, and seen everything right, and, leaving the horse in charge of one of his hands, he went to have a quiet chat with his son before the race.

'There's no need for me to tell you much,' said Jim. 'You have ridden him in his work, and if you ride as well in the race I feel pretty sure of your winning. Don't let them crowd you on to the rails or block you at the finish. You had better lose ground by going on the outside than take any risk of being shut in. Keep an eye on Madsley, he's a good rider, and Distant Shore is a good horse. Steer clear of Jackson and The Captain, because he is not very particular what he does, so long as he thinks it will help him to win. Above all, keep cool, and ride with your head as well as your hands. You have a good horse under you and can make the most of him.'

This was a long speech for Jim, but it was good

advice he gave, and he was anxious his son should win.

Willie listened attentively, and promised to follow his father's instructions.

Dr Tom was very busy, being here, there and everywhere, but he had a cheerful word for all his friends, and seemed to have time to spare a few minutes with each one.

He gave Willie some parting words of encouragement, and said with a laugh,—

'I hope I shall not have to fine you for disobedience at the post. I know you will be anxious to get off, and I'll not leave you if you are smart.'

The bustle and excitement increased as the horses were mounted and filed out on to the course.

Only one side of the track was fenced off, and the carriages and carts made a boundary line on the other side near the judge's box.

Distant Shore went past with a great dash, Ben Madsley sitting him well, and horse and rider were heartily cheered. Rodney Shaw's horse was a firm favourite, and he felt confident of winning. His second string, Seaweed, also went well, and as he was very fast for a mile the pace was likely to be good for the first half of the journey. The Captain also looked well, but there was very little applause as Jackson rode Dalton's horse down the course. Wamba, Scamp and Dingo went together, and then came Neptune, with his small jockey perched on his back and riding like an old and experienced hand.

There was a rare burst of cheering as he went past the crowd, and Willie felt a thrill of excitement as he heard it.

This was the first time he had ridden in a race, and he experienced the pleasurable thrill which applause from a big crowd gives.

Neptune moved like a piece of machinery, his lovely, sweeping stride getting him over the ground at a great pace, and Willie thought to himself, 'This is glorious. He can go and no mistake. If he gallops like this in the race there will be nothing to touch him.'

He saw the bright-coloured jackets ahead of him, and quickly raced Neptune up to them. He had never felt the pleasant rustle of a racing jacket before, and the sensation was delightful. They were soon back at the post, and Dr Tom took them in hand. On a circular course such as this there was a natural desire on the part of several of the jockeys to get a good position on the rails, so as not to lose ground by going round on the outside.

Jackson on The Captain was jostling and pushing about, caring very little for the other riders and their mounts so long as he got a good place himself.

Dr Tom spoke sharply to him once or twice, and when this had no effect he said, 'The next time you disobey my orders, I'll fine you, Jackson, and if that has no effect I'll send you back into the paddock.'

Jackson knew the doctor would be as good as his word, so he kept his horse well in hand. There were

several false starts, and Willie knew Neptune was becoming restless, and inclined to show temper.

'I must humour him,' said Willie to himself, 'and take him on the outside. If they bustle him he'll turn nasty.'

He wisely pulled Neptune back and kept him away from the others.

The start was from the winning-post and every movement was plainly seen by the crowd. Some people, more excitable than others, were shouting at the jockeys, tendering them well-meant, though ill-advised, instructions as to what they ought to do.

Willie took no notice of repeated cries such as,—

'Get Neptune on the rails.' 'You'll be left at the post, little fellow.' 'Give us a chance for our money, Dennis,' and so on.

The lad smiled, and sat the restless Neptune comfortably.

Adye Dauntsey watched him and thought,—

'That lad will make a smart rider when he has had more experience. He keeps his head like an old hand.'

CHAPTER XVIII

HIS FIRST RACE

EVENTUALLY, after much patience, the doctor lowered the flag to a capital start, and amidst a volley of cheers the horses started on their journey.

Neptune got well away, although, being on the outside, he did not get such a lead as The Captain, Jackson having pushed his mount through just as the flag was lowered, a clever piece of horsemanship, but risky and dangerous.

Although Neptune was on the outside, it gave him the advantage of a clear run. Rodney Shaw's second string made the pace a cracker and sailed round the first bend with a long lead. At this point Neptune ran wide and lost a good deal of ground, but Willie soon steadied him, and determined to be more careful in future. It was a sharp circle round the side, and Jackson hugged the rails with The Captain; Ben Madsley, being alongside him on the favourite, who also was going remarkably well.

In a cluster behind this pair came Wamba,

Wattle Tree, Dingo and another, and Neptune was close after them.

Round the far side of the course Seaweed still held a good lead, but as they neared the turn into the straight run home it soon became apparent he would not retain it long, as his jockey was even then at work on him.

There was not much in it as they neared the judge's box; in fact, at the end of the first mile it seemed a very open race.

Past the long line of vehicles and the crowds of people they galloped, all well together, and the thud of their hoofs echoed amongst the throng.

How the people shouted, first the name of this horse, then that, as they caught sight of the colours.

Jim Dennis, who was standing near the judge's box with Adye Dauntsey, saw how splendidly his horse was going, and that Willie had him well in hand, and said to the magistrate,—

'If Neptune is as full of running next time he passes here we shall win, I think.'

'By Jove! how well your lad rides! He is a plucky little fellow,' said Adye.

'Yes, there's not much fear in him, and he is a rare judge of pace; I have proved that when we have ridden together on the station; he has often come with a sudden rush and beaten me,' said Jim.

Round the turn they swept again, and this time Willie held his horse well in hand and secured a good position.

Seaweed had shot his bolt and fallen back, and The Captain now held the lead, Jackson steadying him and keeping a wary eye on the others.

Ben Madsley felt confident of success, for Distant Shore was going well, and pulling him out of the saddle. Still, it was too far from the winning-post, he thought, to take up the running. He glanced to the right, but could not see Neptune, and thought to himself,—

'Dennis has not much chance. He'll be sorry he did not put me up.'

He could not see that Neptune was going strong, not more than a couple of lengths behind him.

At this point the favourite and The Captain held the advantage, and already there was a tumult of excitement at the prospect of one of them winning. Abe Dalton loudly proclaimed that The Captain would win.

'My horse wins for a score!' he kept on shouting, but no one ventured to take his offer.

Jackson still held the lead, and was evidently bent on getting a clear run round the home turn. This, too, was the intention of Ben Madsley, and the riders of Wamba and Dingo were also on the alert.

Willie still had Neptune on the outside, as he did not care to risk being crowded on to the rails and possibly not be able to find an opening at the finish.

Dr Tom was watching the race closely, and thought,—

'If Neptune wins he's a real clinker, for he has

run wide all the way. I'm not at all sure this is not the best plan to ride such a big, striding horse on this course. I hope Willie will last it out. It looks like being a close finish, and he will want all his wits about him. That blow on the head will not help him, it might cause him to feel faint at the last moment. I wish I knew who did it.'

As the horses neared the turn into the straight the crowd became more and more excited, for this was the critical moment, and there had been more than one spill here on previous occasions.

Jackson sent The Captain along at his best pace, but could not shake off Distant Shore. Neck and neck they raced for the turn, with Wamba and Dingo and Scamp, who had come with a rattle close behind, and Neptune still on the outside.

A thought had come into Willie's head which he resolved to put into execution if possible. If he could be sure of Neptune, he thought it might be done, and the horse had great speed.

He meant to come with a rush round the turn, and get so far in front as to be able to sweep down on to the rails without any danger of crossing or interfering with the other horses. It was a bold plan and might succeed.

At last the bend was reached and he brought Neptune round with such a tremendous rush that it electrified all who saw it.

'What's his little game?' muttered Dr Tom.

'He means to get on to the rails,' said Jim to

his companion, but it is too much to expect of the horse; look what a sweep he has to make.'

'He'll do it, I believe,' said Adye.

'It is a dashing move at anyrate, and worth trying for.'

Neptune, however, was not quite equal to the task, for Jackson saw what Willie meant to try and accomplish, and sent The Captain along at such a pace that it was impossible for Neptune to draw clear of him. This run, brilliant as it was, gave Neptune an advantage, even if it didn't accomplish all Willie had intended.

The pace, for the end of a two-mile race, was terrific, and there was soon a long tail in the rear.

Jackson had been pushing The Captain for some time and it commenced to tell upon him.

Madsley noticed this, and thought he had the race as good as won, but he could not get rid of either The Captain or Neptune. The green jacket was so conspicuous that Rodney Shaw became excited at the prospect of winning and commenced to shout the name of his horse. He was standing not far from Jim Dennis, who, hearing him, turned round and said,—

'Neptune beats yours for fifty.'

'Done,' said Shaw, 'a hundred if you like.'

'No, fifty will do,' said Jim.

'I'll have the other fifty,' said Aaron Hyam, and Shaw accepted it.

The yellow jacket was now almost level with the

green and the black; close behind came Scamp, Wamba and Dingo. The issue was confined to this lot.

The crowd shouted until they were hoarse.

'The Captain's beaten!'

It was an ominous sound, and Abe Dalton smothered an oath as he looked and saw Jackson hard at work upon his horse. Still The Captain struggled on and answered gallantly, and Dalton thought he might just get home. Whips were out, and Ben Madsley was calling vigorously upon Distant Shore.

On the outside, nearly in the middle of the course, was Neptune, coming along with giant strides, and Willie sitting still upon him.

At this critical moment the shouts of the crowd, the intense excitement of a desperate finish, caused his head to swim, and he felt faint. He nerved himself for a last effort. He must not fail now when the goal was nearly reached, and Neptune looked all over a winner.

The excitement was tremendous. Never had such a finish been seen at Swamp Creek, and the people surged and swayed in their frantic desire to see the end of this great struggle.

Sympathy was with Willie Dennis. He was such a youngster, and so small, and had ridden such a splendid race. Then Jim Dennis was popular, and neither Abe Dalton nor Rodney Shaw possessed much of this. So the crowd yelled, and

waved hats and handkerchiefs, and the name of Neptune echoed far and wide.

'Neptune wins!' 'Bravo, little un!' 'Neptune wins!'

'The Captain's done!'

Abe Dalton clenched his hands and set his teeth. The Captain was the first of the three leaders to crack, and, despite every effort on the part of Jackson, fell back. Dalton showered a torrent of oaths on the people round him. He cursed Jackson and cursed his horse, and well-nigh choked with rage, but no one heeded him, they were too intent upon the race.

Rodney Shaw was almost frantic as he shouted the name of his horse until his throat felt sore.

Jim Dennis seemed unmoved, but he was seething with intense excitement, hidden beneath a calm exterior.

As for Willie, he hardly knew where he was or what he was doing. The blow he had received caused his head to ache painfully, and a dimness came over his eyes, and he only saw faintly.

He saw a mass of people swaying to and fro, like phantoms in a mist. There was a surging in his ears and a tight feeling at his heart, but he held on like grim death, and rode Neptune for all he was worth. In a hazy sort of way he saw the judge's box, then he fancied he caught sight of his father's set face, but he knew that could hardly be true.

Everything was jumbled up in his mind, and the only thing he recollected afterwards with distinctness was that the green jacket was still level with him and Ben Madsley was riding desperately.

'Distant Shore!' 'Neptune!'

'Neptune wins!' 'Distant Shore wins!'

These were the sounds he heard, in a dull sort of way, and he wondered what it all meant.

He kept his eyes fixed on that green jacket. Would it never leave? Why could he not shake it off? It seemed to dance before his eyes, to be first on one side and then on the other, and a white cap on top, bobbing up and down like a ball. He seemed to be flying through the air, and he knew Neptune was going at a great pace; the horse could do no better, no matter what he did or how he rode, and he sat perfectly still. Had he moved he believed he would have fallen off.

It was all for the best that he could not move, for, had he done so, Neptune might have shirked his work. There was no shirking now, and again and again the ringing cheers proclaimed that Jim Dennis's horse would win. At last, amid a perfect roar of exciting shouts, the pair passed the post almost neck and neck.

Which had won?

The yellow or the green?

Ben Madsley thought Distant Shore had just struggled home in front, but he was not sure.

As for Willie Dennis, he indistinctly recollected

that the judge's box was passed, and therefore the race must be over, and with an effort he pulled Neptune up and turned him round. He did not know whether he had won or not, but the crowd did, for Neptune's number had been hoisted, and the judge's verdict was a short head.

'What a great race the lad rode,' said Adye Dauntsey. 'He's a little wonder, Jim. You must take him to Sydney. He sat as still as a mouse.'

Jim Dennis hurried across to lead his horse in, followed by Dr Tom and an excited crowd of people.

'Well done, Willie,' said Jim, and then, catching sight of his son's face, he trembled all over. Willie was pale as death and looked straight before him with wide, staring eyes.

Dr Tom came up, and, seeing the lad's state, said,—

'He'll hardly be able to weigh in, Jim. Hold on fast, Willie,' he said. 'You must not fail us now; that will never do. You have won the race. Do you hear me? Neptune's won!'

The lad smiled faintly and nodded.

'I'm all right now, Dr Tom,' he said in a dull voice.

CHAPTER XIX

SAL AT WORK

HE staggered as he got out of the saddle, and in a mechanical way unbuckled the straps. Then he walked into the weighing-room with his father and Dr Tom, one on each side.

He scaled all right, and there was another deafening cheer.

When the tension relaxed, and he knew everything was right, and that he had done what had been asked of him, he fainted.

It quickly got about that Willie Dennis was in a bad way, and some people said the race had been too much for him, and that it was a shame for his father to let him ride.

When Dr Tom heard such remarks, he could no longer refrain from speaking out, and said indignantly,—

'If you knew the cause of this fainting fit you would not talk like that. There's been foul play somewhere, and I don't care who knows it now the race is over.'

'Foul play? What do you mean, doctor?' said Aaron Hyam.

'Listen, and I will tell you. Last night Jim Dennis and myself went to your place and left Willie at home. When we returned, we found him insensible on the floor, and he had received a violent blow on the back of the head. Some scoundrel, I suppose, who had laid against Neptune, did it, but we mean to find out the culprit.'

There was an angry murmur at this, for the Swamp Creek people knew and trusted Dr Tom, and they hated foul play.

They were standing inside Aaron Hyam's booth, and Abe Dalton heard what passed, but he knew he had little cause to fear, because no one had seen him enter Dr Tom's. Constable Doonan was also there, and said to Dr Tom, 'Have you repeated this to Sergeant Machinson?'

'No, but the police magistrate knows; and he saw Willie Dennis early this morning and felt the lump on his head.'

Sergeant Machinson, seeing the crowd gathered in the booth, came up and asked what was the matter.

'Matter enough,' said Dr Tom. 'Willie Dennis was attacked last night and hit over the head. I hope you will make inquiries into the matter.' Then, catching sight of Abe Dalton, Dr Tom said, 'Perhaps Dalton can lay his hand on the man who did it. He's about as likely a person as anyone I know for that job. They have some shady fellows hanging around Barker's Creek.'

'You let me alone,' said Abe Dalton, menacingly. 'What right have you to make such accusations against me?'

'The right every honest man has to think ill of a thief,' said Dr Tom, boldly.

'You shall pay for this,' said Dalton.

Constable Doonan put his hand on Abe Dalton's shoulder and said,—

'I saw you coming from the direction of Dr Sheridan's house last night. Be careful what you say and do.'

'And who the devil are you that I should be afraid of you? Can't a man walk about the street without being suspected of such a thing as this? Wait until your betters speak to me,' said Dalton.

'I think you had better let the matter rest for the present,' said Sergeant Machinson to Dr Tom. 'I will see every inquiry is made.'

'Mind you do,' said the doctor, who had a temper when it was roused. 'Mind you do, and don't forget to call at Barker's Creek for information.'

'I know my work, and need no instructions from you,' said the sergeant, and walked away. The doctor's statement was soon known, and sympathy was expressed for Jim Dennis and his son.

Willie, the hero of the town, was taken to a comfortable buggy, and Jim Dennis was about to remove him

from the course when the lad recovered and opened his eyes.

'Are you better now?' asked his father.

'Yes,' said Willie, faintly. 'Please do not take me home; it will do me good to watch the other races.'

'If you think you can stand it, we will remain.'

'I'll be all right, dad. It was more the excitement of the race than anything else upset me.'

When Sal saw Neptune battling out the finish with Distant Shore she rushed down towards the crowd to find out which horse had won.

As she did so she encountered Rodney Shaw, who stopped her and said,—

'Where are you going? You seem to be in a hurry, Sal.'

'Has Willie won? Has he won? Please tell me, Mr Shaw.'

'Yes, he has beaten me and won the race; at least the judge says so. I think my horse won,' he replied.

Sal clapped her hands in delight, and her eyes sparkled. She really looked a handsome woman at that moment, and so thought Rodney Shaw as he saw her hurry away in her eager desire to find Willie.

'I'll have her,' he muttered. 'Abe Dalton must do the trick. He *can* manage it, and he shall.' The look on his face was not pleasant to see.

Sal knew nothing of race-courses, and had only been to Swamp Creek three or four times.

She was helpless, and blundered about in the crowd until, by good chance, she came across Constable Doonan. She at once recognised a friend, and recalled what Willie had told her Doonan had said about her.

The constable recognised her, and was surprised to see her in such a place.

'Where is Willie?' she asked. 'Please tell me where I can find him. Mr Shaw told me he had won the race.'

'Mr Shaw!' said Constable Doonan. 'Have you been with him?'

'I met him a few minutes ago. He said Willie had won.'

'I hope you do not have much to say to Rodney Shaw,' said Doonan.

'No, I do not like him. I am afraid of him. He is a bad man, and he is no friend to Jim Dennis,' she said.

'I will take you to Willie,' said Doonan. 'Come with me.'

Sergeant Machinson saw Sal speak to Doonan, and when they walked away together he intercepted them, and, drawing the constable aside, said,—

'You know very well you ought not to be walking about with that woman. That is not part of your duty. Do you think it is?'

'Yes. She asked me where Willie Dennis was,

and I thought there was no harm in showing her. She is Jim Dennis's housekeeper, and looks after his place well. She is a very decent woman, let me tell you.'

Sergeant Machinson laughed.

'Housekeeper, eh! He seems to pick out the best he can find. Does she come from about here?'

'Yes, I believe so, and she has been with him for some years.'

'Well, take her to Dennis, and be quick; but remember it's not the sort of thing to do here—people notice it,' said the sergeant.

'You go to the deuce,' said Doonan as he walked off, but the sergeant did not hear him.

He took Sal to the buggy, and when she saw Willie she looked frightened, he was so pale.

'What's the matter, lad?' she asked. 'What ails you?'

'He is over-excited,' said Jim, 'and something happened him last night.'

'Happened him!' she exclaimed.

'Yes, he was knocked on the head, but we mean to find out who did it,' said Jim.

The woman's eyes blazed angrily.

'Let me help you to find out,' she said eagerly.

'What can you do, Sal?' asked Jim, surprised.

'I'll find him out. They shall not hurt you, Willie, for nothing.'

'Where are you going?' called Jim as she walked away.

Sal did not look round, but went straight on to where she saw Constable Doonan standing.

'Here again!' exclaimed the constable. 'Why have you left Willie?'

'Do you know what happened to him last night?' she said, answering him with another question.

'You mean at the doctor's place? Yes, I know about it; I wish I knew who did it.'

'You'll find out,' she said. 'Have you any idea?'

He looked at her doubtfully. He was very fond of Sal, but he did not know whether he ought to communicate any suspicions he might have to her. She saw him hesitate, and said,—

'Can't you trust me? I might be able to help you.'

'You?'

'Yes, why not? They say blacks are more cunning than whites.'

'But you are not black, Sal; you are a woman of quite another colour,' and he smiled at her.

'You do suspect someone. Tell me who it is.'

'I met Abe Dalton, alone, coming from the direction of the doctor's house. I thought it strange he should be there when all the people were at the Gum Tree, and wagering going on,' said Doonan.

'Where is Dalton?'

'I saw him last in Hyam's booth. You must not question him about it.'

'Leave that to me,' she said. Then, placing her hand on his arm, she added, 'Find out who did it. You will; I am sure you will.'

'All right, Sal, I'll do my best, but Sergeant Machinson may take the matter out of my hands.'

A contemptuous look came over her face.

I don't think much of the sergeant,' she said. 'You are worth a dozen of him.'

Constable Doonan felt satisfied with himself, and thought Sal a woman of much discernment. He determined then and there to do what she asked, sergeant or no sergeant.

Wandering around, Sal saw Abe Dalton after the next race, and he also saw her.

'This will be a good opportunity of speaking to her,' he thought. 'I would like to do this bit of business for Rodney Shaw; he's rich, and a rich friend is always handy, more especially if he happens to be a partner in a suspicious transaction.'

He put himself in her way, little thinking she was also intent upon seeing him.

Sal was a woman of more than average intelligence and strength, and quite equal to Abe Dalton in cunning when desirous of pitting herself against such a man.

Jim Dennis was the only one who knew her worth and of what she was capable, and when she left him sitting with Willie in the buggy he had not the slightest doubt she had some scheme on hand for discovering the perpetrator of the assault.

'So you came to see your pet lad win?' said Abe Dalton, as he stood in front of her.

'He beat you and that fellow Jackson,' said Sal, exultingly.

Abe Dalton was still boiling over this defeat, and he had not much faith in Sal's sagacity, or in that of any man, woman, or child, with black blood in its veins.

'He never ought to have won. The horse won. Neptune is a good one, I can tell you. The little ass was half dazed at the finish,' snapped Abe.

'So would you have been had you been struck on the head like he was the night before,' she retorted.

'So you believe that story, eh? Well, let me tell you, it's a lie, an undiluted lie, not a single thing to redeem it. Struck on the head! Well, I'm blessed! And you believe it?'

'I not only believe it, but I know who did it,' was the unexpected reply.

In spite of himself he started, and she noticed it.

He laughed harshly.

'You think yourself —— clever, I suppose?' he growled.

'Some of your men did it because you wanted The Captain to win,' she said.

He felt a sense of relief. She did not think he had done it.

'Who are my men?' he asked.

'Shall I tell you?' was her fierce answer.

'Go on, let's have it.'

'Your men are the worst lot yet unhung. They are the lowest of the low, and had not Jim Dennis taken me in I might have been herded with those outcasts from the tribe at Barker's Creek. Beware,

Abe Dalton! King Charlie is not yet dead, and he never forgets. Some day Barker's Creek will run with blood. I can see it—see it now. Run with blood, I tell you, Abe Dalton—and your own will mingle with it, the black and the white together.' And she raised her hand as though she would strike him.

He left her without another word.

CHAPTER XX

DANGER AT HAND

AFTER the races, Swamp Creek settled down into its usual quiet ways, and the excitement quickly subsided.

Most of the inhabitants won a trifle over Neptune's victory and were therefore gratified at the result of the cup.

Willie Dennis was none the worse for the blow he had received, but his father was desperately angry, and no steps appeared to have been taken by the police to ascertain who committed the outrage.

'They are a dunderheaded, sleepy lot,' he said to Sal; 'and Doonan appears to be no better than the others.'

'It is not his fault,' she replied. 'I know who did it, and so do you. It was Abe Dalton. I could see it in his face when I tackled him at the races. The coward shrank from me.'

'I think he is the man,' said Jim; 'but we have no proof. I am going over to Barragong with Dr Tom. We shall not be away more than two or three days. You can look after things here.

Willie will be able to attend to the hands, and see Neptune and the other horses are properly exercised. I will tell Silas Dixon to keep a watchful eye on everything, but I do not think there is anything to fear, and you will not be molested.'

'I am not afraid,' she said; 'and I can use a revolver as well as most men.'

'Yes, you are a good shot,' he answered her. 'I hope there will be no occasion for shooting.'

He rode over with Dr Tom Sheridan on a long-promised visit to Adye Dauntsey.

Jim Dennis was a regular stay-at-home, and never cared to be long away from Wanabeen.

The police magistrate, however, knew how to entertain such visitors, and he possessed a fund of anecdote, and had gone through a wide and varied experience, which enabled him to relate many stories of interest connected with the district.

Abe Dalton was not slow to learn that Jim Dennis was absent from Wanabeen, and he thought it would be a good time to attempt to get possession of Sal during his absence.

He laid his plans accordingly, and four of his men were allotted to undertake the task.

There were, however, in the blacks' camp at Barker's Creek, women who had come to loathe and hate Dalton and all his belongings, and who sometimes managed to escape the vigilance of his

men and get away unseen, when they would visit Sal at Wanabeen, or search out their own tribe. They were bound to return to the Creek, or it would have gone ill with those remaining behind.

Dalton's men took but little heed of the blacks, talking freely in front of them, and it came to their knowledge that Sal was in some danger, so they determined to warn her. The nature of the danger they failed to understand, but that it existed they were certain.

At night one of the gins slipped away unobserved and walked to Wanabeen, where she arrived at daybreak. These blacks knew the country well, and had they been treated in a decent manner would not have been slow to appreciate kindness.

Sal was always willing to give them a helping hand, and tried to persuade them not to go back to Barker's Creek when they came to Wanabeen, but without avail. They regarded her with a sort of awe, knowing her to be partially one of themselves and yet far superior. They could not understand how a woman who had once been in their tribe became as she was.

When Sal went outside she saw the black gin waiting on the steps of the verandah. She welcomed her and gave her food, and then questioned her.

She gathered that some danger threatened her from Dalton's gang, and that Jim's absence from Wanabeen was known at Barker's Creek.

She thought but little of herself, all her anxiety was for Willie and Jim Dennis's property.

Where was Constable Doonan? That was her first thought, for she knew he would help her, and the arm of the law was strong. In such a district it was a hard matter to know where the mounted police are to be found.

Constable Doonan was stationed at Swamp Creek, but he might not be there, and there was no time to lose.

She thought for a few moments, and then sent Willie to tell Dixon she wanted him. She knew she could trust Silas Dixon, although he was a surly, misanthropical sort of man.

Dixon came, and growled out something about being interfered with in his work, and that he wished the boss was at home and there was no women to meddle with him.

'So do I wish he was here,' said Sal, 'for danger is at hand. You must ride to Swamp Creek and seek out Constable Doonan, and if he is not there you must find him.'

'Easier said than done,' was his answer.

'But you must find him, Silas. There is danger!' And she related what the black gin from Barker's Creek had said.

'Whew,' whistled Silas, 'Dalton's lot, eh! They have left us alone for a good number of years, and now the scoundrels are breaking out again. I'll go, and I'll find Doonan. I owe Dalton

one, as many another good man round here does.'

'Lose no time about it, find him as quickly as possible,' said Sal; 'and, mind, not a word to Willie about it.'

'He'd better know. That lad's useful. He's as good as a man, bless yer heart.'

'Tell him, then. Do as you think best,' said Sal.

Willie had been riding Neptune in an early morning spin, and when he returned Silas said to him,—

'I know you'll not be frightened, Willie, at what I'm going to tell you. One of the blacks from Barker's Creek's here, and she tells Sal there's to be ructions around Wanabeen.'

'When?' said Willie, quietly.

'While the boss is away, sure,' said Silas.

'What'll we do?'

'I'm going for Doonan. If he is here they'll get pepper,' said Silas.

'I'll go with you.'

Then, as the lad thought for a moment or two, he added,—

'If I go there will be no one with Sal, but we shall not be long away.'

Silas smiled.

'I thought he was as good as a man,' he muttered to himself. 'He's a chip off Jim Dennis, if ever there was one. Whoa up, you beggar! You just missed me.'

The latter part of these remarks were meant for Neptune, who had lashed out at Silas with both heels.

Willie laughed as he said,—

'He's beaten Abe Dalton once, and he'd do it again if he could only get one home like that.'

'When can you come?' asked Silas.

'I'll have a snack and be with you quick,' replied Willie.

Neptune having been installed in his box and properly looked after, Willie went inside to refresh himself.

'He's told you,' said Sal.

'Yes,' said Willie, consuming a square meal with considerable rapidity, 'he's told me.'

'And you'll go with him?'

'Rather.'

'And when you see Constable Doonan what will you say?' asked Sal.

'Leave that to me. I'll fetch him quick enough.'

'You will be able to find him?'

'I know where he is.'

'Where?'

'Just outside of Barker's Creek, on the watch.'

'What for?' asked Sal.

'Business, so he said,' answered Willie, 'whatever that means.'

The lad finished his meal and left the room.

They were quickly mounted, Silas and the boy,

and rode off in the direction of Barker's Creek, for Willie had told him where he had seen Doonan.

'You "copt" him there this morning. You must have given Neptune a rare good spin,' said Silas.

'He wants it,' said Willie. 'Long and strong work he wants. That won him the cup. Do you know how I felt, Silas, when he was winning?'

'No, lad, but I'd like to.'

They were riding at a good pace, and the old hand thought, 'What a seat the boy has! He can beat me with all my knack of doing it.'

'I felt just like shooting through the sky on a comet,' said Willie.

'As fast as that?'

'Yes; and when we passed the box I had no idea what had won or where I was. Neptune went over the ground at a tremendous rate.'

'But you were bad, ill, and you had no idea what you were doing. That's the yarn they tell me,' said Silas.

'I felt a bit queer, but I stuck on fast and sat still. That's the way to ride Neptune. If I'd moved on him I believe he would have lost. That knock on the head helped me, I *had* to sit still.'

'There's someone over yonder,' said Silas. 'Your eyes are better than mine. Who is it?'

'It is Doonan. Come on,' shouted the lad.

They rode at their horses' best pace, for Constable Doonan was well ahead of them.

'I'll coo-ee,' said Silas, and he did, and the familiar

sound carried far, to Doonan's ears. The constable looked round, and as he did so reined in his horse. He knew there must be something 'up' or they would not have ridden after him at that pace.

He rode towards them.

'You two appear to be having a race,' he said.

They looked at each other.

'Tell him, Willie,' said Silas.

The lad was not long in explaining.

'I'll ride back with you,' said Doonan. 'They can have done no harm yet.'

'Why are you around here?' said Silas.

'I want Seth Sharp,' said the constable.

'What for?'

'There's been murder done.'

'Who is it?'

'Ned Glenn.'

Willie and Silas looked at him in horror. They could not believe it. Ned Glenn, the old coach-driver they had known for so many years!

'Dead—not Ned, surely!'

'It's right, lads; and he just had time to say it was Seth Sharp shot him and that Dalton's lot were in it. Let me get hold of any of them, that's all,' and the constable raised his clenched fist and looked fierce.

The tears came into Willie's eyes. Ned Glenn was a real old friend, and he could not bear to think of it.

'How did it happen?' said Silas.

'The coach was stuck up about three miles outside Swamp Creek. All I know, and the others know, is that Ned was found lying on the ground dying. Two horses were killed, and there were no passengers. What the motive for the business was I don't know and cannot imagine. There was no gold in the coach, and it is most likely Seth Sharp did it out of revenge. You may remember, Silas, it was Ned Glenn who put him away?'

'So it was, so it was,' said Dixon.

'We must make haste,' was Willie's comment. 'Suppose Sharp was one of the men sent over to our place?'

'He'll not venture there. He has put his neck in a halter this time,' said Doonan; 'and Barker's Creek will have to be wiped out.'

CHAPTER XXI

A CLEVER ESCAPE

'THEY cannot well be ahead of us,' said Doonan. 'I have seen no one about.'

'Precious good care they would take you did not see them,' answered Silas.

'We must make the best of our way back,' said Willie, and set the pace faster than Constable Doonan's horse cared to go.

'I shall be left if you go at that rate,' he shouted to Willie.

As Wanabeen came in sight all appeared quiet and safe, and they anticipated nothing had happened there. They were mistaken.

Abe Dalton had laid his plans well. Together with three of his men he had been on the watch for some hours. By a mere chance the absence of the black gin from the camp had been discovered, and Dalton had found brutal means to find out where she had gone.

'It will cost her her life,' he muttered, and then he cursed his men for talking of such matters in front of the blacks. Sal being warned, as he expected would be the case, no doubt either Willie

Dennis or one of the hands would be sent to Swamp Creek for assistance.

Dalton at once decided to ride in the direction of Wanabeen and keep a sharp lookout. He knew every inch of the country and every place of concealment.

Not far from Wanabeen homestead was an old disused boundary rider's hut, and it was here he meant to hide and keep a sharp lookout.

Luck favoured him. With some difficulty the horses as well as the men were packed inside, and no signs of them could be seen.

Abe Dalton caught sight of Willie and Silas Dixon riding away at a fast pace, and knew they must have been put on their guard, but he was surprised at the direction in which they were going, as it did not lead to Swamp Creek.

'What's their little game?' he wondered. 'Perhaps they are on the lookout for Doonan. I shall have to make an example of him. He hangs around Barker's Creek too often for my liking. That fool Sharp; I must get rid of him, or he'll land us in some trouble. He'll have to be fired out and take his chance. There is no help for it.'

When Willie and Silas Dixon were out of sight, the party emerged from their hiding-place, and, quickly mounting, rode as fast as the horses could gallop to Wanabeen.

Sal heard them as they drew near, and looking out at the door saw it was Abe Dalton and his men.

Her heart almost failed her, but she was courageous, and quickly slamming the door, locked and bolted it. Then she fastened the windows, and, taking up the revolver, resolved to defend herself until help arrived. The black gin was crouching in a corner, quivering with terror, for she knew Dalton would show her no mercy when he found her there. It was useless for Sal to ask her to assist in the defence, the poor creature was helpless from sheer fright.

Dalton reached the house first, and banging at the door with the butt end of his whip, shouted,—

'Open the door, my black beauty. No harm shall come to you if you go with us quietly, but we mean to have you.'

She made no answer, and Dalton, becoming impatient, sent a couple of his men to the rear of the house, where they commenced to smash in a window.

The crack of a revolver was followed by a cry of pain, and the smashing of glass ceased.

'She's got a revolver,' said Dalton. 'We must be careful, but she cannot attend to both the back and the front of the place.'

He saw a heavy axe standing in the yard and called to the man who was minding the horses to bring it him. The fellow put the horses in the yard and then brought him the axe; it was one used for splitting logs and was very strong. Dalton brought it down with a crash on the

door, and the wood splintered. He put his hand inside to unlock it, or to pull back the bolt, when Sal fired at him, but missed.

Nothing daunted, Dalton stepped back and again raised the axe. The door, not being strongly built, was soon forced open, and as it fell inwards there was a crash heard at the back of the house, where Dalton's men had also forced a way in. Sal was so intent upon taking aim at Abe Dalton that she did not hear one of the men steal quickly up behind her. He hit up her arm as she fired, and this saved Abe Dalton's life, as the bullet went through his hat.

She was at once pinioned and her arms strapped behind her.

'That was a near shave, Sal,' said Dalton; 'and if you belonged to me I'd damage that face of yours. As it is, I'll leave that for your new master to operate on when he's tired of you.'

'My new master!' she said. 'What do you mean?'

'A very nice man has fallen in love with you, Sal, and we are going to take you to him.'

'You will suffer for this. Wait until Jim Dennis returns,' she said.

Sal knew it was useless to offer resistance; she must escape by some other means when out of Dalton's hands.

Where were they taking her to? It could not

be Barker's Creek. Then she recollected what Rodney Shaw had said to her, and shuddered. Would he dare to risk this outrage, with the assistance of such men as Dalton and his gang? A man in his position dare not do it.

She little knew of what Rodney Shaw was capable.

They took her outside and strapped her on one of Jim Dennis's horses.

The black gin cowering in the corner had escaped notice until, unfortunately for her, as Dalton was leaving the room he caught sight of her.

'There you are!' he said with a savage scowl. 'I'll teach you to play the spy, you black devil!'

He rushed at her and hit her across the face and head with his whip. She howled with pain, a piteous cry, almost like that of a dying animal, a long wail that caused Sal to shudder.

'I'll teach you,' he said, and, picking up Sal's revolver, he shot her through the head with no more compunction than he would have done a dingo.

'You will tell no more tales,' he said as he kicked her body away from him. 'I'll leave you here for the boys to clear away when they return.'

The party were soon on their way to Cudgegong, and they kept a lookout in every direction for signs of Willie Dennis and Dixon.

'We shall leave them on the left,' said Dalton. 'I don't think there is any danger of our being seen.

I hope you are comfortable, Sal,' he added with a grin.

She made no reply. She was busy thinking how she would act, for she knew they were going in the direction of Cudgegong.

It was a long, tedious ride, and the men were in a bad humour. They thought Abe Dalton a fool for being mixed up in a job like this.

'Did you shoot that black gin?' one of them asked.

'Yes; she will tell no tales,' he answered.

'There'll be a lot of trouble over it, and with Seth Sharp's bungling piece of work the Creek will be too hot to hold us.'

'If you are afraid to stay there you know what to do,' growled Dalton.

'Clear out, I suppose. You are mighty fond of telling some of us that. Mind we don't clear you out.'

'Yes, I'll mind that, and I'll not forget what you have said. That's your gratitude after I have kept you all these years,' said Dalton.

'Kept me!' echoed the man. 'Come, I like that. It's me that's helped to keep you, and more fool I have been to do it.'

Sal was in hopes they would quarrel and give her a chance to escape, but, although Dalton and some of his men were always falling out, their mutual interests were too inseparable for any really serious quarrel to arise.

Rodney Shaw was awaiting their arrival at Cudgegong, for Dalton had sent him word the previous day that he might expect them. He was in an excited state, and had been screwing up his courage with his favourite liquor. He knew he was doing a rash and cowardly act, one that would not only get him into trouble possibly, but would cause everyone to regard him as a scoundrel.

He was, however, a man who cared little for such things, and, if the worst came to the worst, he could clear out from Cudgegong. He had come to hate the place, and there were other matters connected with it, memories that haunted him and caused him to have many sleepless nights. He thought in time Sal would settle down with him, as she had done with Jim Dennis, and that she would be company for him. Until such time arrived he meant to keep her safe and do as he liked with her.

He little knew the task he had set himself or the woman he had to deal with. There was much of the cunning of the black in Sal, and she was not a woman to submit tamely to indignities. When Abe Dalton and his party arrived at Cudgegong Rodney Shaw at once had Sal taken to the room prepared for her.

'You will soon be happy and contented here,' he said to her; 'and you will not find me a bad master. You would not come to me of your own free will, so I thought I would send for you.'

Sal gave him a fierce look from her big dark eyes, and said, as she faced him,—

'You are a coward, not a man. Jim Dennis will throttle the life out of you when he finds out what you have done.'

'He will not find out, because he will never suspect you are here,' he replied.

She made him no answer. She felt Jim Dennis would know what had befallen her.

He left her and went to settle with Dalton.

'You will find yourself in a nice mess over this,' said Dalton.

'I'll take the risk. I have the woman, that is what I wanted. Here is your money.'

'It was a stiff job,' said Abe Dalton, 'and we have run a big risk. Can't you make it a trifle more?'

Rodney Shaw swore at him, and said a bargain was a bargain, but he eventually gave him twenty pounds over the sum agreed upon.

When they were gone he went again to Sal. He meant to try and coax her into a good humour. He succeeded ill, and, losing his temper, said,—

'Remember I am your master now, and you will have to obey me. Think it over during the night, and make up your mind to be contented.'

With that he left her, and she looked round for some means of escape. The one window was heavily barred, and the door was fastened on the outside.

Rodney Shaw had taken every precaution, so he thought, to secure her; but he did not anticipate she would try to attempt what seemed impossible, and escape. He did not know Sal. She meant to try every means in her power to get out of that room.

The house was, as usual, built on thick wooden piles and was some height from the ground. As Sal walked round and round she heard a board creak, almost in the same spot, each time she passed over it. She knelt on the floor and felt closely round the skirting. To her joy she discovered the white ants had been busily at work on one of the piles and that they had penetrated the skirting board of the room. She tapped it, and the sound told her it was hollow inside, crumbling away. So great was her joy that she had much difficulty in restraining herself from testing her plan at once.

She knew, however, it would be safer to wait until it was dark and all was still. The time passed slowly, but at last she determined to risk it.

She pressed her hand heavily on the board, and, as she expected, it gave way and crumbled to pieces. It was an easy matter for such a powerful woman to rip the rotten portion away, but a more difficult task awaited her when she attempted to pull up the flooring boards, and she had to be very careful not to make much noise. Her hands

were cut and bleeding, but she heeded it not. She pulled and tugged with all her strength, and at last one board gave way, but the space made was not wide enough for her to squeeze through. The second board did not take so long to raise, and this gave her a sufficient opening.

She slipped through and found herself underneath the house, free, if she could only manage to get away unobserved or without rousing any of the dogs.

She crawled along the ground, hardly daring to breathe, until she reached the fence, which she quickly climbed.

Once outside she commenced to run for her life, and as she was fleet of foot she soon put some distance between herself and Cudgegong. She knew in which direction Wanabeen lay, and could tell by the star-lit heavens that she was on the right track.

All night long she struggled on, until at last she could go no further, and, falling from sheer exhaustion, she was soon in a deep sleep.

CHAPTER XXII

DETERMINED MEN

As Willie Dennis and his friends drew nearer to the house they saw their first conjecture was wrong and that something serious had taken place during their absence.

As they reined in their horses Constable Doonan said,—

'Let me go in first,' and, drawing his revolver, he walked cautiously into the house.

There he saw the black gin huddled up in the corner, a pool of blood round her and a bullet wound in her head.

'Sal!' he shouted. 'Sal, where are you?'

There was no answer, everything was ominously quiet.

Willie Dennis and Silas Dixon followed the constable, and were horrified at what they saw.

'There has been a desperate scene here,' said Doonan, 'and Sal is gone. They may have taken her away. We must send a messenger at once for your father, my lad.'

'I'll go,' said Willie. 'I am a light weight and can ride fast. You and Silas must search for Sal.'

'That will be the best plan,' said Doonan.

'I'll start now,' said Willie. 'We can clear up here when we return.'

'We must leave everything as it is until I have made my report to Sergeant Machinson,' said the constable. 'He will have to make a move against Dalton's gang this time.'

Willie was soon on his way to Barragong, his blood boiling with rage at the outrage that had been committed at Wanabeen, and he wondered what had become of Sal.

In the meantime, Constable Doonan and Silas Dixon were scouring the country in search of the missing woman.

At the hut where Dalton and his men had been in hiding Doonan examined the place and found the members of the gang had been concealed there.

'They must have seen you and Willie ride away,' he said; 'and in that case they would have a long start of us.'

They camped out that night near a creek, and ate the food they had brought away with them from Wanabeen. They were used to roughing it and to lie on the bare ground with the saddle for a pillow.

They were astir early in the morning, and rode round in a wide circle, looking for tracks or any signs of Sal. At last Constable Doonan thought he saw an object lying on the ground which resembled a human being. It was too far distant for him to discover clearly, but he knew it was not an animal.

He rode towards it, and, with a shout of joy, roused Sal, who was still asleep where she had fallen, and at the same time it recalled Silas Dixon.

When Sal saw who it was she could hardly believe in her good fortune. At first she thought it was Rodney Shaw who had overtaken her.

Doonan was off his horse and at her side very quickly, and knelt down to support her, for she was still very weak. He moistened her lips from his flask, and, when she had recovered somewhat, questioned her.

Sal gave him a brief account of all that had taken place, and when Doonan heard who was the instigator of the outrage he could hardly credit it.

'Rodney Shaw!' he exclaimed. 'A man in his position! He must be mad. Rich man as he is, he shall suffer for it, Sal. He need not think he can do as he pleases, even in this lonely place. I pity him when he gets into Jim Dennis's clutches; he'll about settle him.'

He put Sal on his horse and walked by her side. They had several miles to go before reaching Wanabeen.

'Who was it shot the black gin?' asked Doonan.

'Abe Dalton. The other men were outside, he was alone in the house. I heard her cry out when he lashed her with his whip, then followed the shot, and she cried no more. Dalton killed her,' said Sal.

'He shall swing for it,' said the constable, savagely.

They proceeded for some distance in silence, and then Doonan said, in a tone of admiration,—

'You were clever to escape from Cudgegong, Sal.'

'I meant to get away somehow. Had I not escaped I would have killed myself rather than be in Shaw's power. He is a wicked man.'

'There are not many worse,' said Doonan. 'I never had much opinion of him, but I did not think he was such an out-and-out "rotter."'

Next morning the party arrived from Barragong, accompanied by Adye Dauntsey, Sergeant Machinson and half a dozen mounted police.

When Jim Dennis heard how Abe Dalton had acted, and that Sal had been taken to Cudgegong, his whole body trembled with rage and excitement.

Had he not been persuaded to act otherwise, he would at once have ridden to Cudgegong and, taking the law into his hands, have called Rodney Shaw to account.

Both Dr Tom and the police magistrate, however, restrained him.

'Leave it to me,' said Adye Dauntsey. 'I'll see they all meet with their deserts.'

'If Sergeant Machinson had done his duty this would not have happened, and poor Ned Glenn would have been alive.'

Dr Tom's dog Baalim caught sight of the dead woman and howled piteously, and the sound was so weird it started them all.

The police magistrate questioned Sal as to what

had taken place, also Constable Doonan, Willie Dennis and Silas Dixon. He took their depositions and then called Sergeant Machinson on one side.

'We must act at once, sergeant. The sooner the better,' he said. 'Dalton and his gang ought to have been rooted out of Barker's Creek years ago. I am afraid there has been some neglect of duty here. Take my advice and make up for it now by extra vigilance and alertness in securing these men. You understand me. I have no wish to do you an injustice or injury, but I must report this matter as I see it. Let your conduct now wipe out any defects of the past, and then all will be well. I shall state what I think in my report, and I hope I may be able to add something to the effect that any mistakes you have made in the past have been amply atoned for by your activity and bravery at Barker's Creek.'

The P.M. spoke kindly yet firmly, and Sergeant Machinson was well aware that much of his conduct in connection with Abe Dalton's gang would not bear investigation. He had sense enough to see that the course Mr Dauntsey advised him to take was the best. He knew he could trust the magistrate in every respect. He was surprised at his firmness on this occasion, because he had not 'put his foot down' before. Sergeant Machinson also knew that recent events could not be passed over, and that in future it would be impossible for him to shield Abe Dalton in any way. What he dreaded

most was the thought of Dalton being taken alive, in which case he would be likely to 'let out' some curious business transactions in which the sergeant had been mixed up.

'It is very kind of you, Mr Dauntsey, and you may rely upon me to follow your advice to the best of my ability. I think you will have no cause to complain of me when all is over.'

'That's right, sergeant, the proper way to look at it. I am sure you and your men will do your duty. I am also sure of one other thing, that you will freely acknowledge you have done Jim Dennis a gross injustice. You can see now he has never had any dealings with Abe Dalton's gang, quite the reverse. The manly course for you to take is to tell Dennis you have been mistaken.'

Sergeant Machinson did not relish this, although he knew it was but just.

'I'll do it,' he said at last. 'He deserves it.'

Adye Dauntsey was well pleased that he had put matters on such a good footing before the attack on the camp at Barker's Creek commenced.

He knew there would be a desperate resistance and much danger, and he was resolved to share in it.

Sergeant Machinson went up to Jim Dennis and said,—

'May I have a word with you?'

Jim looked surprised, but replied,—

'If you wish; but you can have little to say to me that I shall be pleased to hear.'

This did not lighten the sergeant's task or make it more pleasant, but he resolved to go through with it.

'I wish to state that I have done you an injustice and that my suspicions have been unfounded. I am sorry for what has happened and I know you have had nothing whatever to do with Dalton's gang. I will do all in my power to bring them to justice for making this attack on your place, and I hope you will lend us a hand in securing them. It will be a tough struggle, and some of us may not come out of it alive. Will you shake hands?' said Sergeant Machinson.

Jim Dennis had a kindly nature. He shook the sergeant's hand heartily and said,—

'I like to hear a man own up when he has been in the wrong. You have been hard on me, sergeant, but we will forget that. I will help you all I can. I have a score to settle with Abe Dalton and Rodney Shaw; they can be classed together now.'

A council of war was held at Wanabeen, after things had been put fairly straight, at which Adye Dauntsey presided.

He thought they had better lose no time, but attempt to take Abe Dalton and his gang at once. 'They will not leave Barker's Creek,' he said. 'It is their only safe place. There are eight of the police and four of us, if Silas Dixon will join us.'

'Five,' said Willie, who was present. 'What about me?'

Adye Dauntsey smiled as he replied,—

'You must ask your father about that, Willie.'

'He can go with us if he wishes,' said Jim, looking at him admiringly.

'I can shoot well,' said the lad.

'You can,' said Dr Tom. 'You beat me at revolver practice the last time we met.'

'That settles it,' said the magistrate. 'We will include Willie. Now, how many men are there at Barker's Creek?'

'A score or more,' said Jim, 'and all desperate characters. We need not reckon the blacks.'

'They like a fight sometimes,' said Dr Tom.

'Dalton's men have ill-treated them. They are more likely to turn on his gang than attack us,' said Jim.

'That is probable,' said Dauntsey. 'What do you think, sergeant?'

'The best plan would be to surround the place to-night and attack them when there is light enough. If we can conceal ourselves, and they do not know of our presence, we might take them unawares. It is not probable, for they are sure to be on the watch, but it is just possible the rush could be made through the blacks' camp by four or five of us, and the remainder must ride straight for Dalton's house and the men's shanties. Of course, if they are prepared for the attack we can change our plans accordingly.'

'Constable Doonan and Dr Tom know the

place very well,' said Jim Dennis. 'What do they think?'

'Sergeant Machinson's plan is all right,' said Dr Tom; 'but I think you may be quite sure they will be ready to receive us. Abe Dalton, when he considers it over, will know an attempt will be made to disperse his gang and he will not be caught napping.'

Constable Doonan agreed with Dr Tom and said,—

'When Rodney Shaw discovers Sal has escaped he may go to Barker's Creek to see Dalton. We might get him there, and if he is caught with the gang it will be the worse for him.'

'I cannot think whatever possessed him to commit such an act of criminal folly,' said Dauntsey. 'He can have hardly realised the consequences of his conduct.'

They finally resolved to go to Barker's Creek that evening and attempt to secure Dalton and his gang next day.

They had a tough task to accomplish, and they knew it, but they were all eager to match their strength against Dalton and his men.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ATTACK ON BARKER'S CREEK

THEY made a move when the sun went down and the atmosphere became cooler. There was sufficient light for them to see their whereabouts, but the darkness increased in a short time.

This was, however, desirable for the work they had in hand.

Sergeant Machinson with the police magistrate, Jim Dennis and Dr Tom, rode together, Willie being close behind them with Constable Doonan, and two of the mounted police went on some distance ahead. The remainder of the little force brought up the rear.

Soon after their departure Sal heard a soft footfall outside; it startled her at first, but she knew it was a black fellow and she had no fear. She was pleased when she saw it was old King Charlie and that he was alone.

The old man had heard of the doings of Dalton's gang and was determined to find out if Sal was safe. He almost reverenced her, for she had always been kind to him and under-

stood him, and listened to his weird tales with attention and belief.

He had a strange imagination this old black king, and a wonderful love for and knowledge of nature, curious in one so ignorant.

'You here, Charlie?' she said. 'Come in and rest.'

King Charlie hated houses; he preferred to remain outside and said so.

Sal brought him something to eat and drink, and watched him with kindly eyes. She guessed why he had come.

'You are safe. It is well,' he said in the peculiar way the blacks speak, and which is necessary to put into English as nearly as possible to convey their meaning. 'It came to me that you had been carried away by that wicked man who is steeped in every crime.'

'And it was true, King Charlie. He carried me off, but the good spirit saved me, and I am here safe and well,' she replied.

'They laid rough hands upon you, they beat you with sticks, lashed you with their whips, called you vile names. Is it so?'

'No, they did not beat me. They stole me for another man—Rodney Shaw,' she said.

King Charlie stood up and called down the wrath of all the powers and spirits he knew upon that gentleman's head, then squatted down exhausted and beat his hands.

She soothed him and said, 'The white men are

gone to Barker's Creek and they will kill Dalton and his gang.'

'It is good,' said King Charlie. 'We will go too.'

Sal thought for a moment, and it occurred to her that King Charlie and his tribe might be of use to them. She knew these blacks, the best of the whole tribe, could fight, and were hardy, tough men. They would do anything King Charlie told them, for they were wont to obey.

'It is far and you are weary,' she said. 'Where is the tribe?'

'Woolloola,' he said, and pointed with his hand.

Sal knew Woolloola was the name given to one of their camping grounds; there were no houses there, it was not a township, merely a black fellows' camp.

'They take the gang to-morrow early,' she said. 'You will not be in time.'

'The fight will be long. We shall be in time,' was the reply.

'Follow me,' she said.

She got an old lantern and, lighting the candle, went out into the paddock. Standing still she took his arm and pointed to a mound of newly-turned earth.

'The black gin from Barker's Creek who gave me warning lies there. Abe Dalton shot her through the head. Thus was she repaid for trying to save me.'

She felt him tremble, and he raised his hand and shook it as though brandishing a spear.

'She shall be avenged!' he muttered. 'Blood shall

be spilled for her. The tribe will avenge her and King Charlie will lead them on. Come!'

The old black walked before her with a peculiar dignity that would have been amusing had it been assumed, but it was not, it came natural even to this savage.

'Give me food and I will go,' he said.

'You are weary; rest.'

'I am no longer weary. She shall be avenged.'

He left her, and Sal knew he might prove a friend in need to the white men who were attacking Dalton's gang.

King Charlie, although a great age, was still active, and walked many miles a day. Leg weary he seldom was, but long fasting and starvation caused him bodily weakness. In a case such as this he was stirred on by thoughts of vengeance on Dalton and his gang, who had so bitterly wronged him. He went swiftly and surely in a direct line for his Woolloola camp, and arrived there before Sergeant Machinson and party reached the outskirts of Barker's Creek.

King Charlie harangued the tribe and roused them from their accustomed apathy. It was long since they had been in conflict with white men, but they were nothing loath to try their strength with such natural enemies as Dalton and his men. They knew every member of the gang, from bitter experience, and were not likely to make mistakes in the conflict.

They were quickly on the march, and travelled rapidly, leaving their women wailing behind.

The party from Wanabeen had no conception of what had happened, and they were only to find out later on, much to their surprise and that of Dalton's men.

On their arrival in the dense country round the Creek it soon became evident there was to be no surprising of Barker's Creek or a bloodless victory.

As they were consulting the best plan to adopt, a shot was heard, evidently a signal from one of Dalton's men who had by some means discovered their whereabouts.

'They must have had spies out in different parts of the country,' said Jim Dennis. 'We are in for a warm time, depend upon it. I don't see why you or Dr Tom ought to risk your lives over this job,' he added, looking at Mr Dauntsey and then at the doctor.

'Look here, Jim Dennis, I'm not in the habit of turning my back on the enemy, and it's a trifle mean of you to suggest such a thing.'

'No one doubts your courage, doc,' said Jim; 'but you ought to take care of yourself, because your professional services may be required.'

'And the doctor's duty is in the thick of the fight, where all the blood is being spilt. What do you say, Mr Dauntsey?'

'I am going to take my part and you will take yours, so there is an end of it; but Dennis meant

well in what he said. If anyone ought to be kept out of harm's way it is Willie,' answered the magistrate.

'He will not run any risk. Will you, my lad?' said his father, anxiously.

'No, dad; but if there is a chance of potting one of the gang I'll try how I can shoot,' he replied.

It was growing light, and in half an hour there would be sunshine and no chance of further concealment.

They had decided to spread out in a circle, and make for the centre of the Creek at a signal to be given by Sergeant Machinson.

They separated, Willie keeping near his father.

It was impossible to see whether anyone was concealed in the bushes, and they had to keep on the alert in case shots were fired.

They had not long to wait, for in a few moments the crack of rifles was heard in the bush. A bullet whizzed past Jim Dennis, and he called out to Willie to follow him and galloped on some distance.

'Why does not Machinson give the signal?' he thought. 'It is not much good hanging around here to be shot at; I want to get at close quarters.'

A shrill whistle sounded, and Jim Dennis charged straight through the bush, followed by his son.

A shot from Jim's revolver was followed by a heavy fall, and he shouted,—

'Winged him, Willie; he's down. Come on!'

In a few minutes the little party were inside

Barker's Creek, and they then saw Abe Dalton's plan of defence.

From Dalton's house, and the others near it, came a regular hail of bullets, and a mounted policeman threw up his arms and dropped out of his saddle like a stone.

One of his comrades dismounted, placed him across his horse, then sprang up behind and followed the others, Sergeant Machinson calling out,—

'Back! back for your lives! We have no chance in the open.'

It was a wise order, for there was nothing in standing to be shot at by men who were so well sheltered.

They halted in the bush out of rifle shot distance, and Dr Tom attended to the wounded man.

After a brief examination he said,—

'He'll pull round if there is no inward bleeding. He has been hit in the chest.'

'Your work has commenced early, doctor, bad luck to it,' said Jim Dennis. 'We'll make them pay for this later on. My advice is, fire them out.'

'We cannot get close enough,' said the sergeant.

'Fire the bush in their rear,' said Jim. 'It is dry, and the flames will soon spread.'

'What about the blacks? There's a lot of them around there.'

'We must tell them to clear out. If they do not go they will quickly move when they smell fire. I guess some of them know what a bush fire means.

It is our best chance. Those fellows are all well armed,' said Jim.

'We must capture Abe Dalton and Seth Sharp alive,' said Mr Dauntsey, 'and as many of the others as possible. Shooting is too good a death for them; they must be hanged.'

'I will fire the bush and give the blacks warning,' said Jim Dennis. 'Let me go alone.'

'You are taking on a big risk,' said the doctor. 'They will not leave the rear unprotected and you'll get shot.'

'I wish to go,' said Jim.

'Let me go with him, sergeant,' said Doonan.

'Very well; only remember we cannot afford to lose a man, so run no risks that you can avoid,' replied Machinson.

They rode away and took a wide circuit round the Creek. They reached the rear of Dalton's house safely, and Jim dismounted while Doonan held his horse.

They were, however, seen from the shanties, and fire was at once opened upon them, and they retreated.

'I must crawl through the bush, snake fashion,' said Jim, 'and when I have the wood fairly alight run back as fast as I can.'

'It is a terrible risk; think of the lad,' said Constable Doonan. 'Let me go. I have no belongings.'

'I said I would do it, and I will,' said Jim.

'Wait a while; they may think we have returned, and it will give you more chance.'

They remained in their position for a considerable time, when Jim Dennis assumed a listening attitude. His solitary life had caused him to be quick at distinguishing sounds.

'What's up, Jim?' asked the constable.

Jim Dennis held up his hand to ensure silence.

Doonan watched his face, and saw his expression change to one of triumph.

'By the Lord, we have 'em now,' he said. 'Listen! Can you hear that noise?'

Doonan was all attention.

'It's a humming kind of sound. I have heard it before.'

'You have. It is blacks on the march, and they are coming here. If it's King Charlie and his tribe we will catch these scoundrels like rabbits in a net. Come with me, we will ride to meet them.'

CHAPTER XXIV

A FIERCE FIGHT

WHEN the blacks, more than a hundred in number, saw Jim Dennis and Constable Doonan riding towards them, they halted, not being sure as to who they were.

King Charlie, however, recognised them, and went forward to meet them.

'How came you here?' asked Jim.

'Sal said you were on the war-path. I heard of the attack on your house and went to see if she was safe,' said Charlie.

'And you thought you would come on here and help us?'

'Yes.'

'And so you shall. We will give you plenty of work. Are your fellows armed?' said Jim.

'We have spears and boomerangs, and nullah nullahs and stone hatchets,' said Charlie.

'I think they will come in handy at close quarters,' said Jim with a smile. 'We shall have no occasion to fire them out. We can capture the lot alive.' Then, looking at Charlie, he said,—

'Listen to me. When you hear shots fired rush

through the bush and attack the rear of the houses. We shall be in front, and they will not suspect any assault at the back. Creep close up, and hide in the bushes until you hear the signal. There are a lot of blacks over there to the right, and they will probably join you when the fight commences.'

The old man was all attention, and signified that he understood what was required and would carry out the orders.

'My revenge is near,' he said. 'They stole my people and made dogs of them, and they shall die.'

'We want to take them alive,' said Jim. 'Do not kill if you can secure them.'

Charlie struck his spear on the ground and said savagely,—

'Blood for blood, and we spare them not!'

Jim Dennis saw it was useless to argue with him, and he knew if any of Dalton's men fell into King Charlie's hands they would not have an easy death.

They rode back to their comrades, and King Charlie and his men advanced into the bush unseen.

'Back again so soon?' said Mr Dauntsey. 'Anything fresh to report?'

'The best of good luck has befallen us,' said Jim, excitedly. 'Charlie and his tribe are here. The old fellow heard from Sal what we had afoot, and came on here to help us and take his revenge. There's over a hundred of them, and they are by this time concealed in the bush at the back of the houses.

When we advance in front and fire they will make a rush in the rear, and I promise you they will not be slow about it.'

'This is splendid,' said Mr Dauntsey. 'What do you say, sergeant?'

'It is the best thing that could have happened, but we shall have to be quick or those black fellows will kill them all. They will show no mercy to any of the gang,' said Machinson.

'We had better all advance in line, about a dozen yards apart,' said Mr Dauntsey, and to this the sergeant agreed.

No time was lost; the wounded man was left in as comfortable a position as possible, and they moved ahead.

'All fire quickly,' said Machinson. 'If you see no one, aim where the smoke is, on the off chance of hitting.'

In a few minutes, when Dalton and his men saw them again advancing, the firing recommenced, and it was sharply returned.

Above the crack of the rifles, however, was heard a terrific yell, which completely drowned the sound of the firing. There was a tremendous crashing in the bush at the rear of the houses and the cries of many blacks.

Dalton and his gang were surprised, and when they realised what had happened were almost in despair. They knew no mercy would be shown them, by the blacks and preferred to risk capture at the

hands of the police. They did not mean to give in without a desperate struggle, for their lives were at stake.

In Dalton's house, besides himself, were six of his men, including Seth Sharp and Rodney Shaw.

When Shaw discovered Sal had escaped, his rage knew no bounds, and he acted like a madman, so much so that his manager thought he had lost his senses.

Benjamin Nix tried to calm him and partially succeeded.

'Why make such a fuss over her? She's far better away from here,' said Nix.

'I'll be even with her,' replied Shaw; and there and then made up his mind to ride to Barker's Creek and bribe Dalton to scour the country for her.

When he arrived at Dalton's he found affairs had reached a crisis.

Abe Dalton was in no mood to be trifled with or to stand upon ceremony.

'This comes of meddling in your affairs,' he said savagely. 'Curse you and the girl too! You have ruined us all, yourself included, you blundering fool!'

Rodney Shaw commenced to realise the extent of the scrape he had got into, but he did not mean to be beaten.

When Abe Dalton explained to him what had happened, and that his spies had brought in news that an attack was to be made on Barker's Creek Rodney Shaw said,—

'I'll stay with you and see it through. I'd like to get a chance of putting a bullet in Jim Dennis.'

'There's more than you would give a good deal for such a chance,' said Dalton. 'If you mean to stay, well and good ; I'm not going to stop you ; but let me warn you it will be putting your neck in a noose to be found here. You had better clear out and do the best you can for yourself.'

Rodney Shaw, however, decided to remain. He thought Dalton and his men would easily repulse any attack made upon them, and Dennis might be killed in the struggle. He meant to have a shot at him if possible, for he had learned something during the past week that had caused him to tremble whenever he thought of the owner of Wanabeen. What that something was will be related later on.

This was how Rodney Shaw came to be at Barker's Creek, which was the worst place he could possibly be found in.

'These blacks will do for us,' said Dalton, savagely ; 'and it is all the fault of you fellows keeping the gins here.'

We must fight it out,' said Shaw. 'Curse the blacks!'

He took a steady aim and fired at Jim Dennis, but missed.

The tumult was tremendous. The black fellows, now they were let loose and had a chance of revenge, were so many infuriated savages. They yelled and danced, brandishing their spears, and rushed

upon the houses, heedless of the shots fired at them.

In the blacks' camp at the creek there was a regular pandemonium. The gins shrieked with terror and thought their end was at hand, and so it was for many of them. Some of these black women had left behind in King Charlie's camp husbands and brothers, and they now took their revenge by spearing or clubbing them. It was a horrible scene, but King Charlie took no heed of it, nor did he attempt to stay the slaughter. In his savage way he regarded it as an act of justice, and he may have been right.

Round Dalton's house the fight was fierce. At the rear the blacks were forcing an entrance, at the front the police had already battered in the door.

All were on foot now and it soon became a hand-to-hand conflict.

Seeing the game was up, Rodney Shaw thought of his own safety.

At the back of the house several horses were stabled, and these had not been injured, although they were frightened. Shaw thought if he could make a rush for it he might reach them and gallop off. They were all saddled and bridled ready for an emergency.

The blacks were now swarming into the house, and Dalton's men kept them back with their revolvers.

Passing into a side room, Shaw saw a chance of escape.

The attack was mainly confined to the other part of the house, where a desperate stand was being made. Squeezing himself through the small window, Rodney Shaw managed to reach the ground safely.

Clutching his revolver, he hurried across to the horses. He was kicked and jostled by the excited animals, but escaped serious injury.

Mounting one he had fairly under control, he was riding away when some of the blacks saw him and with a yell rushed after him.

Constable Doonan also saw him, and, making for his horse, was quickly in pursuit.

Shaw, however, was too far ahead, and Doonan, halting, pulled out his carbine, took a steady aim and fired.

His shot he saw took effect, but Rodney Shaw did not fall. 'I hit him,' said Doonan. 'That will prove he was here.' Then he rode back, dismounted, and drawing his revolver, rushed into the fighting mob.

Blood flowed freely and many blacks lay dead, but still Dalton and his men held out.

From the other houses the members of the gang came out and joined in the fight, for they knew it was their last chance.

Dr Tom was busy looking after the wounded.

Jim Dennis was hit in the fleshy part of the arm, but went on fighting.

Two of the constables were mortally wounded, and the doctor was doing what he could for them.

Willie Dennis had accounted for one man, and from a distance watched the fight.

'Help me, Willie,' said the doctor. 'You will be more use here than over yonder.'

Ten of Dalton's men were killed by the blacks, and the remainder were nearly all wounded.

Dalton fought like a tiger, and when he saw Sergeant Machinson and another constable rushing upon him to seize him, he shouted,—

'So you have done for me at last, sergeant. Take that!'

He fired his revolver, and the unfortunate man fell dead, shot through the heart.

Adye Dauntsey saw him fall, and fired at Dalton, hitting the hand in which he held his revolver, and shattering it. He was at once secured.

There was no resistance now except on the part of Seth Sharp, who fought like a wild beast, but he was eventually beaten down and firmly bound.

The house presented the appearance of a shambles.

The body of Sergeant Machinson was carried outside, and Dalton said as they passed him, as he lay bound on the floor,—

'That's how I treat men who play me false. He's better dead. He was false to his trust and false to me.'

Adye Dauntsey heard him, but made no remark.

The sergeant, whatever his misdeeds, had paid for them with his life while doing his duty.

They were all tired and worn out after the struggle. Many blacks had been killed, and King Charlie and his tribe set about burying them by Mr Dauntsey's orders.

The attacking party had lost two constables and Sergeant Machinson, and nearly all of them bore marks of the severe encounter.

Seth Sharp and Abe Dalton were firmly secured, and only five other men of the gang were taken alive. The blacks had already set fire to the houses and humpies, and Barker's Creek was in flames.

'They have settled the difficulty for us,' said Mr Dauntsey, 'and I think it is the best thing that could have happened. Barker's Creek will be wiped out at last.'

CHAPTER XXV

A STRICKEN WOMAN

THE affair at Barker's Creek caused a great sensation, and the Sydney and Melbourne papers had long accounts of it, chiefly supplied by Adye Dauntsey and Dr Tom Sheridan. The latter took care to let it be known how Rodney Shaw had acted, and his report was the cause of a startling and unexpected *dénoûment.*

A week after the fight Jim Dennis had retired for the night. He was alone in the house with Sal, as Willie had gone to Barragong for a change. He had been out all day, and, being thoroughly tired, slept soundly.

During the night a woman might have been seen toiling with weary steps across the lonesome land. She was footsore and hungry, well-nigh starving. She had been at Swamp Creek and found there no rest or shelter. She seemed to shrink from contact with everyone, and had it not been for the doctor's dog she would have gone on without food or drink. Baalim was sniffing round his master's house as usual, on the lookout for a canine encounter, when he saw this woman. Baalim knew every man, woman and

child in Swamp Creek, and he perceived she was a stranger. Such an important fact must be communicated to the doctor.

The dog bounded into the house barking furiously, and Dr Tom, coming out to administer a caution to him, saw the woman standing, uncertain, outside in the street.

'She looks deuced tired and hungry,' he thought, and without hesitation called to her.

'My good woman, you look tired,' he said. 'Have you come far?'

'From Sydney,' she said in a weak voice.

Dr Tom was staggered and incredulous. Sydney was some hundreds of miles away.

'A team-master gave me a lift as far as Barragong,' she explained. 'I have walked from there.'

'Come in and rest, and I will find you something to eat,' said the worthy doctor.

She hesitated, but he insisted, and she came inside.

'She's seen better days,' thought Dr Tom, but delicately forbore questioning her, although he wondered what she could want at Swamp Creek if she had no friends, which seemed probable.

She ate like a famished woman, and he was sorry. When she had finished she thanked him and left, and he made no effort to detain her; he had no right to do so.

He watched her walk wearily down the street and leave the town.

'Poor soul!' he said to Baalim as he patted his

ugly head. 'She's seen trouble, old dog; and, by Jove! she must have been a handsome woman once. What a pity! Where the deuce can she be going to?'

Her meal at Dr Tom's had given her strength, and under the starlit sky she struggled on. She followed the coach track and at intervals sat down to rest.

Towards morning she came in sight of Wanabeen and stopped. For fully half an hour she stood and looked at Jim Dennis's home. Her eyes filled with tears which coursed down her sunken cheeks, and she sank down upon her knees and tried to pray.

The words could not come, for there was a great sin upon her soul. Her breath came in sobs and gasps, she panted like a wounded creature. Staggering to her feet, she pushed on hurriedly, fearing her strength would fail, and at last sank, exhausted, on the steps of Jim Dennis's house, much as Sal had done years before.

Then she passed into a fitful slumber, and as Jim Dennis had found Sal, so the half-caste found her.

Sal rubbed her eyes and looked.

'A white woman!' she exclaimed, and then felt afraid.

What could a white woman want here? How did she get there?

Sal looked at her long and earnestly, and something in the woman's face seemed familiar to her.

Where had she seen a face like that?

She must call Jim Dennis and let him act as he thought best.

She roused him and he started up.

'Is it late, Sal?'

'No, early, about five.'

'What has happened?' he said sharply, noticing the scared look on her face.

'There's a woman asleep on the steps—a white woman.'

Jim Dennis clutched her arm.

'A white woman,' he repeated in a hoarse voice.

'Dress and go out to her,' said Sal.

Jim Dennis put on his clothes mechanically; he dreaded he knew not what.

'A white woman,' he muttered, 'and she has tramped it here.'

He went out in a hesitating kind of way.

'What is she like?' he asked quietly, but she noticed the tremor in his voice.

'Go and see. She is aleep. You can look at her face.'

He had not pulled on his boots, and he went quietly outside. He looked at the sleeping woman and staggered back as though he had been stabbed. He put his hand to his face to shut out the sight.

What a flood of memories rushed over him.

Sal watched him. She knew now where she had seen such a face before. It was like Willie's face when he was at the point of death.

Jim Dennis looked at the sleeping woman again, and his features became hard and stern; his mouth was cruel and his eyes flashed ominously.

Yes, it was Maud come back. The woman who had so deeply wronged him and blighted his name, the woman who had disowned her own son—he could have forgiven her, perhaps, but for that.

He went inside and took up his revolver.

Sal looked at him, terrified, then she darted forward and held him by the arm.

'No, no, not that, master, not that. I know her. It is Willie's face. You found me there half dead and carried me in your arms and restored me to life. You cannot kill her. She is Willie's mother!'

He still held the revolver and shook her off.

'It is murder, murder—and a woman in her sleep. Jim Dennis, you are a coward for the first time! Deal with the man who wronged her and you. Have a settling day with him first.'

She had roused him. The taunt struck home.

'By God! I will, Sal. Settling day with him. It will be a heavy one.'

Out on to the verandah he went again, and when the woman opened her eyes she saw the man she had so deeply wronged looking down upon her like an embodiment of the spirit of vengeance.

So terrified was she at his look that she fainted and rolled on to the ground.

Sal went to her assistance.

'She comes not into my house again,' said Jim.

'What of the man?' asked Sal.

'She can come in,' answered Jim.

'Carry her in.'

'No.'

'Then I will,' and Sal lifted the light form in her arms and placed it on her own bed. 'What you did for me I do for her,' she said.

Maud Dennis, for such it was, although she bore no right to the name, gradually recovered.

Sal was at the bedside and smoothed her hair.

'Who are you?'

There was a faint suspicion of jealousy in the tone of her voice.

'I am Sal, Jim Dennis's housekeeper.'

'Not his wife?'

Sal looked at her with contempt as she answered,—

'No, not his wife.'

'Forgive me. I loved him so much long ago.'

'Then why did you leave him? It was cruel,' said Sal.

'It was kind. I should never have made him happy,' she said.

Jim Dennis came in.

'Leave us alone,' he said to Sal.

'You'll not hurt me, Jim? You'll not kill me?' said the wretched woman. 'Oh, if you knew how I have suffered! I am dying, Jim, and I have come to tell you all.'

'No, I will not kill you, and you deserve to suffer. I want to hear nothing, only one thing—his name,' said Jim Dennis.

'You must hear. I was tempted, tried. I did not tell him who I was, and he would never have known

but when he deserted me in London, I meant to follow him some day and denounce him for the villain he is. He knows now, and let him beware of you. He ill-treated me. I lived a wretched life, and then when he had tired of me he cast me off. I wronged you past forgiveness, but how have I suffered for my sins? I worked and slaved day and night until at last I had to fall still lower.'

She shuddered, and he turned his face from her. This was the mother of his Willie! The lad should never know it, never see her. He must send to Barragong at once and have him detained there until he could act.

'I scraped enough money together to pay a passage to Sydney in a sailing vessel, one of the poorer class, and the miseries of that long voyage I shall never forget. In Sydney I found my parents were dead. I had no friends, very little money. I started to walk here. A team-master gave me a lift to Barragong.'

Jim Dennis started. Willie was there. Then he recollected the lad would not have known her had he seen her.

'From Barragong I walked to Swamp Creek, where a kindly man gave me food and rest.'

'Had he a big dog?' asked Jim.

'Yes, it was the dog attracted his attention to me.'

'Dr Tom, just like him,' thought Jim. 'He little thinks who she is.'

'Then I came on here. Let me die here, Jim. I have not long to live. You cannot thrust a dying woman out.'

He made no answer.

She moaned piteously.

'Let me die here, Jim. Let me see Willie before I go and ask him to forgive his wretched mother.'

'You may die here,' said Jim, harshly; 'but you shall never see my boy. You disowned him and he thinks you are dead.'

She was crying bitter tears of repentance, but they had come too late, and she was afraid to die without forgiveness on earth.

'Jim!' she said suddenly as she caught his arm. 'Jim, I dare not die without your forgiveness.'

There was such a look of horror in her eyes that even he was softened, and said quietly,—

'I will forgive you, Maud, freely forgive you; but you must never let Willie know, and he shall not see you.'

'Not even when I am dead?' she asked.

'No, not even then.'

She sobbed bitterly, and Sal, hearing her, felt the tears well up into her eyes.

'I never knew him to be cruel before,' said Sal to herself.

'One thing more,' said Jim Dennis. 'Who was the man?'

'Your friend, Jim. Your black-hearted, treacherous friend,' she answered.

'I had no friends,' he said.

'A man who called himself your friend. He was in Sydney. I met him. He was going to England, and offered to take me and spend his wealth with me, marry me when it was possible.'

Light was dawning upon Jim Dennis, and his hands clenched so that the nails bit into the flesh.

'It was Rodney Shaw,' she said.

Jim Dennis sprang up with an oath.

'By God! can such a villain live?' he cried.

'He had not seen me at Wanabeen, you recollect; he had gone to Sydney before I came here, and lived there some time before he went to England. He is a cruel, heartless man, and ruined our lives. He deserves no pity.'

'He shall have none from me,' said Jim Dennis. 'I will flog him like a cowardly cur and then shoot him.'

'He is a dangerous man,' she said.

Jim Dennis laughed harshly. He was not afraid of such a man or a dozen of them.

'Sal,' he called, 'there is work for me to do before it is too late. Send Silas Dixon for Dr Tom as soon as he comes in.'

'Where are you going?' she asked.

'To kill the man that wronged me and tried to ruin you.'

'Rodney Shaw?' she exclaimed in horror.

'He is the man. Settling day has come at last.'

CHAPTER XXVI

SETTLING DAY

JIM DENNIS rode towards Cudgegong, vengeance gnawing at his heart.

So Rodney Shaw was the man who had wronged him, and he, Jim Dennis, had clasped his hand in friendship since then.

How he hated the man, this thief who had robbed him and dishonoured his house. It was with a glow of exultation he thought the hour was at hand when he could call him to account. He meant to settle with Rodney Shaw before he got into the more tender clutches of the law. He would show him no mercy, for he had a double score to pay off now, as there was the insult to Sal to be wiped out.

He worked himself up to such a pitch of savage resentment that he was scarcely answerable for his actions.

This was what he desired, to deaden all the better feelings in him so that there was no possibility of his showing any mercy.

He had heard from Constable Doonan that he had hit Rodney Shaw as he escaped from the fight at

Barker's Creek, and the wound might have proved dangerous. So much the better, his enemy could not escape him then.

And Rodney Shaw, what of him?

When he made good his escape from the Creek he rode on to Cudegong, and arriving there in safety, had his wound dressed. The bullet struck him between the shoulders and caused him intense pain.

He explained as well as he could to Benjamin Nix how it happened, and accounted for his presence at the fight by saying the police had surrounded the place while he was at Dalton's house.

'Doonan fired at me as I was escaping, and that is how I got the wound. Do the best you can for me, Nix, I am in a bad way.'

'It serves you right,' thought Nix, and did his best to relieve him.

Rodney Shaw had something else to contend with in addition to his wound. He had heard from Maud Dennis and discovered who she was, and that she intended to let Jim Dennis know the name of the man who had wronged him.

This preyed upon his mind and made his wound worse. He tossed about restlessly and was soon on the high road to a bad attack of fever.

'I will send for Dr Sheridan,' said Nix.

'It is useless; he will decline to come,' said Shaw.

'I have never known him do so in a serious case,' answered Nix. 'He has even attended Abe Dalton

and pulled him through a severe illness. If he attended Dalton surely he will come to you.'

'I tell you it is useless,' persisted Shaw. 'There are matters you know nothing of that will prevent his coming.'

Rodney Shaw, however, knew it would not be long before someone else came, the man he dreaded most to see—Jim Dennis. He wished the shot he had aimed at him had taken effect, then he would have been well rid of him.

He knew when Jim Dennis heard the truth nothing would keep him from Cudgegong. If it had not been for his wound he would have been well on his way to Sydney, and might have escaped. He made an effort to rise, but fell back exhausted. He felt it would be better to risk everything rather than face this angry, wronged man. He called Nix and said,—

'If Jim Dennis calls tell him I am too ill to see him.'

'I will,' was the reply; but Nix thought to himself, 'If Jim Dennis wishes to see you no one can stop him after what you have done.' He meant the abduction of Sal; he did not know of Rodney Shaw's greater sin.

When Jim Dennis arrived at Cudgegong he got off his horse and strode into the house.

Benjamin Nix barred the way, and asked,—

'Do you wish to see Mr Shaw? If so, he is too ill; it would be dangerous to disturb him.'

Jim Dennis laughed.

'I have no quarrel with you, Ben,' he said, 'but I must see him. If the shock of my presence kills him, well, so much the better, it will save me doing it.'

'You don't mean to harm him?' said Nix, alarmed.

'That's precisely what I do mean,' said Jim.

'Then you must be prevented from doing so,' said Nix.

Jim Dennis knew there were several people about the place, and he did not wish to be hindered in his work, so he tried to propitiate Ben Nix. 'I shall not be long with him,' he said; 'and when I have done with him, and you know all, you will side with me.'

'I always do that,' said Ben. 'You and I have never been bad friends.'

'But we shall fall out if I do not see him quietly,' said Jim. 'I mean to do so, and you had better let me pass.'

Benjamin Nix saw he meant it, and stood on one side.

He argued that a disturbance would probably be as dangerous to Rodney Shaw, or more so, as an interview with Dennis.

'Which room is he in?' asked Jim.

Ben pointed it out to him, and he went to the door.

He knocked, and Rodney Shaw said angrily,—

'Come in. There is no occasion for you to knock, Nix. I have not had a wink of sleep for hours.'

'You will have plenty of sleep shortly,' said Jim Dennis, entering the room.

Rodney Shaw lay on his bed and stared with glassy eyes at the speaker. He felt as though his last hour was at hand, and he wished he could rise and fight for his life. He could not move without causing intense pain, and there he lay, helpless, at the mercy of his bitterest enemy.

Jim Dennis strode up to the bedside and shook him roughly.

'Get up and answer for your sins, you black-hearted scoundrel!' he said in a voice of suppressed passion. 'No shamming sick with me, remember. Stand up and fight for your life like a man—Heaven forgive me for calling you one!'

Rodney Shaw groaned.

'I am wounded,' he said. 'I have been shot.'

'Where?' asked Jim Dennis. 'Show me the wound.'

'I cannot.'

'Show it me.'

'It is in my back, between my shoulders,' said Shaw.

Jim Dennis laughed savagely.

'In your back. A fitting place for it. Things such as you never face an enemy, they are always wounded in the back.'

He pushed him over and saw there was blood on the bed.

'So you have not lied this time,' said Jim. 'I have come to have a settling day with you. It is a long-standing account and a heavy one. You are the scoundrel who stole my wife and robbed my child of its mother. You are the man, and you have taken my hand in friendship since.'

He raised his whip and was about to bring it down across Rodney Shaw's body. He hesitated. He would not strike a wounded man with his whip.

'I meant to thrash you, but you cannot stand up and take it. That part of your punishment I will count out, but you must pay the rest in full.'

'What do you mean to do?' asked Shaw.

'Kill you before I leave the house, anticipate death by a few hours. You are bound to die anyway. I can see it in your face. Your miserable victim is at my house, dying, and you are going fast, but I will not give you that chance, for I mean to kill you, Rodney Shaw.'

'At your house?' gasped Shaw.

'Yes, she dragged herself there to die, a victim to your treachery and cruelty. Even when you had stolen and dishonoured her you could not be true to her. You are too vile a thing to live, therefore you must die.'

'One word, Dennis. I wronged you, but not knowingly. I did not know she was your wife.'

'That makes no difference to me. You wronged her, that is sufficient. Leave me and my wrongs out of the question. I have waited for this day for years and have sworn you shall pay the penalty.'

Rodney Shaw was gasping for breath. The excitement and the moving of his body had caused his wound to bleed profusely, and he soon became exhausted, and fainted.

Jim Dennis watched him with a bitter smile on his face.

'I have been cheated at last. He cannot stand up and take the punishment I would give him. I cannot shoot an insensible man, it would be murder. Sal was right, it would be as cowardly with him as with her.'

He opened the door and called Benjamin Nix.

'He is insensible,' said Jim. 'His wound has opened again and he is bleeding to death.'

'Then nothing can save him?' said Nix. 'I have sent for Dr Sheridan.'

'He is at Wanabeen by now,' said Jim.

'Who is ill there?'

'My wife, or the woman who was my wife.'

Benjamin Nix knew something of that story.

'Has she returned?' he added.

'Yes, to die in the home of the husband and child she had deserted for that man,' said Jim, as he pointed to Rodney Shaw.

Benjamin Nix started back and said,—

'Can it be possible he is such a villain?'

Rodney Shaw opened his eyes and looked at them vacantly. A violent fit of coughing seized him and the blood poured from his mouth. He commenced to struggle, for the terrible flow choked him. They went to his assistance and raised him, but it was too late, his head fell back and he was dead. A higher power than Jim Dennis's had summoned him to answer for his sins.

'Jim, I'm glad of it; I mean that I'm glad it happened this way, not your way,' said Nix.

'It is better so,' said Jim. 'He will have a heavy settling day when he is called before his last Judge.'

'Sometimes I have thought he was not Rodney Shaw,' said Ben Nix, 'but someone very like him.'

'Who knows?' said Jim. 'That's strange. I have thought the same thing.'

Jim Dennis rode back to Wanabeen.

During his absence Dr Tom had arrived and done all that lay in his power to ease the dying woman and render her last moments free from pain.

The messenger sent to Barragong had missed Willie Dennis, who was on the way home.

When Jim Dennis arrived at Wanabeen and entered his house he saw his son standing by the bedside holding his mother's hand. To violently pull him away was his first impulse, but Dr Tom stopped him by saying in a low voice,—

'She is going fast, Jim. Be very quiet.'

Peacefully and quietly the woman who had wronged

and been wronged passed away, with Willie's hand in her own.

'Who was she, father?' asked Willie.

Those words spoke volumes to Jim Dennis.

He bent over and kissed the dead woman's forehead.

'An unfortunate woman I once knew well, Willie,' he said, and thought to himself, 'She died without letting him know; it was brave of her. May she be forgiven as freely as I forgive her.'

'Rodney Shaw is dead,' said Jim to the doctor.

Dr Tom looked at Jim and then at the dead woman. He fancied he had solved the problem of Jim Dennis's life, and he was not wrong.

CHAPTER XXVII

NEPTUNE'S SON

THE trial of the Barker's Creek gang excited much interest, and it took place at Bathurst.

It is needless to go through the evidence given at the trial, as it merely recapitulated the events with which we are already familiar.

All the prisoners were sentenced to death, and there was a general feeling of satisfaction with the verdict.

Constable Doonan was soon afterwards promoted and raised to the rank of sergeant, and had charge of the district formerly under control of the unfortunate Machinson. All who took part in the fight and the extermination of the gang were eulogised for their bravery.

One lady was so enamoured of Dr Tom that she wrote and offered him her hand and fortune, which he respectfully declined.

Jim Dennis prospered during the next few years, and his son Willie was a great help to him.

A claimant to Cudgegong Station appeared in the person of a cousin of Rodney Shaw, and he made good his claim.

The new owner of Cudgegong, Chris Shaw, was a very different man to his cousin, and he soon became a firm friend of Jim Dennis's. He was not, however, enamoured of station life, as he had lived in Sydney, and one day he made a proposition to Jim that he should take over the management of Cudgegong.

'I mean to live in Sydney, Dennis,' he said. 'This life does not suit me, and I want to get back to my racing and town amusements. Will you take it in hand?'

'What about Ben Nix?' said Jim. 'I should not care to oust him out of his billet.'

'Ben is growing old,' said Chris Shaw, 'and he is quite willing to remain and leave the responsibility to you. He says you always got on well with him.'

'Very well,' said Jim; 'I will accept, and the terms you offer are quite good enough; in fact, generous.'

'And if at any time you can afford to buy Cudgegong you shall have it at a reasonable figure,' said Chris Shaw.

Jim's eyes glistened. He would have dearly loved to make Wanabeen and Cudgegong one property for Willie's sake, but it seemed beyond his most sanguine dreams.

He thanked Chris Shaw for his offer, but said there was very little chance of his being able to buy such a large station.

Chris Shaw went to Sydney, and Jim Dennis and

Willie had their hands full with Wanabeen and Cudgegong.

Everything prospered, and they had no severe droughts. Jim Dennis put by all the money he earned as manager, and also made a big profit out of Wanabeen. He commenced to have hopes of realising his ambition after all.

Neptune had grown into a fine sire, and Jim Dennis had many good horses and mares by him.

One in particular he set great store by. This was Grey Bird, a beautiful horse the colour of his sire, out of a mare named Seamew.

Grey Bird was a four-year-old, and had won a couple of minor races at Swamp Creek and Barragong, but so far as the big meetings were concerned he was an unknown quantity.

Jim Dennis knew if he could win a race, such as the Sydney Cup, he could win a lot of money and not risk much. Against such a horse as Grey Bird the odds in a big race would be remunerative, more especially if Willie, an unknown rider in the metropolis, had the mount.

He had entered Grey Bird for the Sydney Cup, but it was regarded as a piece of bluff, and no one ever thought it was his intention to run the horse.

The journey to Sydney was long and tedious, as there was no railway communication within some hundreds of miles, and then it was hardly safe to train a valuable horse.

Jim Dennis had, however, overcome far greater

difficulties than the sending of a horse to Sydney. His never-failing counsellor, Dr Tom, was consulted, and expressed his opinion that the thing was feasible and that Grey Bird would have a chance in the Sydney Cup.

'Try it, Jim. Try it,' he said. 'There's nothing like self-confidence, and I am sure none of the southern jockeys can give Willie much. He's the cleverest lad I ever saw on a horse. By Jove, how he snatched that Barragong Handicap out of the fire on Dart! It was a better race than the memorable one he rode on Neptune.'

'I think I'll try it. We can all go down to Sydney together with the horse. You will go with us?' said Jim.

Dr Tom looked gloomy. As usual, funds were low, and he did not think he could stand the expense.

'Of course you will go as my guest,' continued Jim. 'I want your company, and your skill would come in useful in case of accident.'

Dr Tom smiled as he replied, 'Generous as ever, old man. You know where the shoe pinches. I will accept your offer because I know it is made with a good heart.'

'I am not afraid to leave the stations now Dalton's gang are out of the way. What a curse they were!'

'No mistake about that. It was a fight! I'm itching for another.'

'There will be no chance for a nest of thieves

round here with such a man as Sergeant Doonan about.'

'No,' replied the doctor; 'he deserves all the praise he receives.'

Willie Dennis was delighted at the thought of going to Sydney and riding his pet Grey Bird in the great race. He loved the horse, and Grey Bird was so fond of his young rider that he was uneasy when anyone else rode him.

The arrival of the coach was anxiously awaited, in order to see the weights for the Sydney Cup.

At last the paper came, and Jim Dennis eagerly tore the wrapper and glanced up and down the columns, Willie looking over his shoulder.

'There it is!' said Willie, pointing to a long list of horses.

'That's it. I say, Taite's horse has top weight, nine stone twelve pounds; that's a fair start. Our fellow will be near the bottom. What will he get? Let's guess!'

He put down the paper and looked at Willie.

'I'll guess seven stone twelve pounds,' said Jim. 'That would give him a chance.'

'Too much,' replied Willie. 'I'll say seven stone six pounds.'

Jim opened the paper again and looked down the list.

'Here's luck, Willie. He's only got seven stone.' Then his face fell and he said, 'You will not be able to get down to that weight.'

'Yes, I shall,' said Willie, and ran outside to the weighing-machine.

'I am only seven stone seven pounds now,' he shouted. 'That seven pounds can soon be knocked off. Dr Tom will see to that. Tell him he will have to dose me.'

'We will have no dosing,' said Jim. 'It weakens you too much, and you require all your strength for a long, severe race like the Sydney Cup.'

It was considered a stroke of good fortune for Jim Dennis's Grey Bird to have only seven stone in the Sydney Cup, and Swamp Creek and Barragong folk vowed they would back the local horse no matter how good the others in the race might be.

Adye Dauntsey and Dr Tom were present at Grey Bird's final gallop before his long walk to Sydney commenced. The magistrate meant to take a few weeks' holiday and go to Sydney to see the race.

'I saw his sire win one of the best races I ever witnessed at Swamp Creek, and I must see his son eclipse even that performance.'

'We shall be mighty proud of your company at Randwick,' said Dr Tom. 'To have the celebrated P.M. from Barragong with us will considerably enhance our reputations.'

'Chaffing as usual, doctor. I believe you would laugh at a funeral.'

'Probably, if I had not been attending the deceased in a medical capacity,' replied the doctor.

'I suppose under such circumstances you might possibly think you had a hand in facilitating his departure from this life,' laughed Mr Dauntsey.

The Sydney Cup was a great race even in those

days, when such horses as Yattendon, Fishhook, The Barb, Flying Buck, Zoe, Archer, Banker, Lantern, Toryboy, Flying Colours, Clove, and many other good ones were winning, or had just won, all the big events at Sydney and Melbourne. It was the year of good horses when Grey Bird went south, and Jim Dennis knew that with only seven stone his horse would have no easy task.

The handicapper had not much regard for station-bred and trained horses, and he said to himself, when he came to Mr James Dennis's Grey Bird, four years, by Neptune—Seamew, 'From Wanabeen, eh? That's near the place where that fight occurred with Dalton's gang a few years ago. They cannot have much idea of training in that quarter; and I do not suppose the horse will run. If they have the pluck to bring him all that way, and run him against such cracks as we have now, they deserve to be given a good chance. Seven stone will do you, Grey Bird,' and then he set to work to try and give others a chance with the top weights, a somewhat difficult task.

Grey Bird's final gallop pleased them all, and Willie rode him splendidly.

'He is a mover,' said Mr Dauntsey. 'He'll not disgrace our district in looks or in the race.'

'If my property would carry a mortgage, I'd back Grey Bird for all I could get on it, but I am afraid a loan would cause the premises to fall down,' said Dr Tom.

'Shaky, are they?' asked Mr Dauntsey, laughing.

'Very,' replied the doctor.

All preparations were made for the departure for Sydney, and Dr Tom decided to ride one of Jim Dennis's horses, as he said he doubted whether his own would carry him so far.

Adye Dauntsey was to join them at Barragong. He preferred good, congenial company to the quicker way, and more doubtful society, by coach.

Ben Nix was left in charge at the stations, and Sal had a friend from Swamp Creek to stay with her.

Sergeant Doonan promised to keep a strict eye on Wanabeen, and this was a pleasing duty to him, as he was very partial to Sal's company.

'And, Jim, just put me this on Grey Bird for luck,' said Sergeant Doonan as he handed him five one-pound notes.

CHAPTER XXVIII

GREY BIRD IS ADMIRED

THEY arrived in Sydney without any misadventures, and the long journey proved far more enjoyable than could have been expected.

The party, small as it was, had this advantage, they were all friends and understood each other, and had fought side by side in the time of danger. Great care was taken of Grey Bird, and the constant walking exercise suited him, and he arrived in Sydney in fine condition.

The cup was to be decided the following week, and in the meantime the horse was stabled near Randwick with a friend of Mr Dauntsey's. Permission was given to exercise him on Randwick track, and much interest was manifested in the cup horse from 'way back.'

Grey Bird was conspicuous owing to his colour, as he was the only grey horse at exercise.

Willie rode him a strong two-mile gallop, Dr Tom and his father being interested spectators.

The local trainers were considerably impressed with Grey Bird's style of moving, and comments

were made on the folly of handicappers letting unknown horses in with such light weights.

There was considerable speculation on the Cup, as usual, and several horses were backed for heavy stakes.

Against Grey Bird fifty to one could be had when he reached Sydney, and Jim Dennis was not slow to accept such tempting odds to win him several thousands. He took a thousand to twenty five times from one bookmaker, who regarded him as fair and legitimate spoil. He then obtained these odds again to another hundred, so that he had the nice bet of ten thousand to two hundred. After Grey Bird had been seen out at Randwick only half this price was obtainable, and the men who had laid fifties were not well pleased with their books.

Dr Tom managed to collect a few outstanding accounts, some several years old, before he left Swamp Creek, and he backed Grey Bird to win him five hundred.

'If it comes off, Jim,' he said, 'I'll have a new turnout and buy sufficient drugs to doctor the neighbourhood with for the next five years.'

Willie became anxious as the eventful day drew near. He had come down to seven stone without dosing, having had long walks during their journey to Sydney. He never felt better in his life, and thought he had a good chance of success. He knew the Cup course well,

having galloped Grey Bird over it two or three times.

He found the going on the rails was excellent, but the centre of the course was holding.

The morning of the race was beautifully fine, an ideal day for good sport.

Randwick presented the usual bustling scene, and everyone was on the tiptoe of expectation.

The favourite for the Cup was Defiance, owned by one of the best-known sportsmen in the colonies. The horse had nine stone eight pounds to carry, and was top weight, Taite's horse having been struck out.

Defiance had several fine performances to his credit, amongst them being the Melbourne and Australian Cups, and he was regarded as the best stayer in Australia. The crack jockey, Jack Ashton, was engaged to ride, and so eager was the desire to back his mount that five to one was taken freely. Target, owned by Chris Shaw, who had registered his cousin's colours—green jacket and white cap—was also in good demand. Tatters, Warfare, Bung Bung, Baby, Walwa and Hova all figured prominently, but Grey Bird had dropped back to a hundred to three, as no one appeared inclined to support the country-bred one.

This was a very tempting price, and so Jim Dennis thought, and took a thousand to thirty twice, so that he stood to win a matter of twelve thousand besides the stake.

Before the race a long interval took place, and

much curiosity was shown in Grey Bird on account of his colour.

The horse looked a picture. He was one of those greys that show their colour well, not a washed-out grey, but bold and shiny in his coat. He was as fit as he could be made, and his powerful quarters and strong loins and back caused good judges to think seven stone would be a mere feather-weight to him.

A crowd collected round as Jim saddled him, and some curious remarks were passed about country-bred horses.

'He looks well,' said one; 'but they cannot be expected to know how to train in such a God-forsaken hole as Swamp Creek.'

Dr Tom turned round and said to the speaker,—

'I come from Swamp Creek. It is not quite the place you have described it. After the race you will sing very small. Take my advice and back the horse from that "God-forsaken place."'

The man looked ashamed of himself and walked away.

Mr Dauntsey was well known in Sydney, where he had been popular before he was sent to Barragong.

He came up with several friends, amongst them three ladies, who were eager to see the famous grey he had said so much about.

'What a beautiful creature! Mr Dauntsey.'

'He is. I knew you would admire him; and he is as good as he looks, Miss Corbold.'

The lady who had admired Grey Bird was about four-and-twenty and very good-looking. She was a cousin of Mr Dauntsey's and had been to Barragong once or twice.

'Why do you persist in calling me Miss Corbold?' she said, smiling. 'It used to be Molly.'

'You have grown beyond Molly,' he replied.

'Oh, no, indeed I have not, and Molly I insist it shall be.'

'I am quite willing, Molly.'

'That's better. Now show me Mr Dennis, the man with the history. What a sad life his must have been! Is he very interesting?'

'Very, and as good a fellow as ever lived. He is just saddling the horse.'

Molly Corbold looked at Jim Dennis, and her scrutiny was satisfactory.

'Will you introduce me?' she said.

'With pleasure. I am sure you will like him.'

Jim Dennis. having put Grey Bird to rights, left him in charge of the attendant to walk him about.

'Allow me to introduce Miss Corbold,' said Adye Dauntsey.

Jim Dennis, raised his hat, and, as he shook her hand, he thought,—

'What a good-looking woman.'

'I have heard so much about you from my cousin,' she said, 'that I was anxious to meet you. What a splendid horse Grey Bird is!'

'I am glad you like him,' said Jim, well pleased.

'I think he will run a good race. My son rides him. Here he is,' and he introduced Willie.

Molly Corbold liked the son at first sight as well as she had done the father, and she expressed the hope that he would win the race.

'I think so,' said Willie. 'I shall try my very best.'

There was not much time for conversation, as the signal was given for the horses to go to the post.

Amidst a chorus of good wishes Willie was lifted into the saddle, and Grey Bird walked quietly down the paddock.

Defiance, the favourite, had been mobbed by the people, and his trainer was glad the ordeal was over.

The roar of the ring could be heard and the hoarse shouting of the odds. There had been several ups and downs in the market, and Grey Bird again touched twenty to one, so many men, after looking him over, deciding to 'save' on him.

Jim Dennis met Chris Shaw as he walked towards the stand. Shaw had backed Target to win him a good stake and was sanguine of success.

'What chance has Grey Bird?' he said to Jim.

'I advise you to have a trifle on at the odds; but of course you have backed your own horse.'

'Yes, and he'll run well. I think I will have a score on yours. Are you going for a big stake?'

'Big for me. I have an object in view.'

'What is it?'

'Cudgegong,' laughed Jim.

'By Jove, you shall have it! I'm sick and tired of it, and can make better use of the money. I hope you beat me, upon my word I do,' said Chris Shaw.

'I shall not be able to pay all the cash down—'

'Never mind that. You will work it off. How much do you stand to win on Grey Bird?'

'About twelve thousand.'

'Then you shall have Cudgegong for that amount of cash down if you win.'

'It is very kind of you,' said Jim.

'Not at all. You are doing me a kindness by taking it off my hands,' and he hurried away after a friend.

Jim Dennis had not expected this, and it made him more anxious to win.

He walked across the ring and joined Mr Dauntsey and Dr Tom. The horses were passing in the preliminary canter with Target leading.

'That's Chris Shaw's horse,' said Dr Tom. 'I trust you will lower those colours like you did at Swamp Creek.'

'I have just left Mr Shaw and he hopes the same thing,' said Jim.

'Surely he has no desire to be beaten,' said Mr Dauntsey.

'He wants me to win,' said Jim. 'He has promised to let me have Cudgegong for twelve thousand down, and said he hoped Grey Bird would win, so that I could take it off his hands.'

'They are a rum lot, these Shaws,' was Dr Tom's comment.

'Here we are! By Jove, look at him! What a horse! Willie sits him as firm as a rock,' said Mr Dauntsey as Grey Bird swept past amidst a murmur of admiration from the crowd.

'No horse went better,' said Jim, as the last of the eighteen runners galloped past.

'I have a spare fiver,' said Dr Tom, 'I'll risk a bit more,' and away he went into the ring. 'I had a job to get a hundred to five,' he said on his return. 'He will start at a shorter price than that. I heard Chris Shaw back him.'

Mr Dauntsey also stood to win a fair amount, and thought it nothing derogatory to his position to do so.

Some delay took place at the post, and this told against the heavy weights.

Willie did not mean to be jostled out of his position by the local jockeys, who seemed to regard him with a certain amount of contempt. Frighten him they could not, as they quickly discovered.

'Now, then, pull out!' said Jack Ashton, as he tried to force Defiance between Grey Bird and the rails.

Willie took no notice of him.

'Pull out, you country-bred imp! Do you hear me?' yelled Ashton in a rage.

Still Willie made no answer; but he thought,—

'If I get alongside you at the finish I'll show you what a country-bred imp can do!'

'Go back, Ashton!' shouted the starter. 'The lad's in his right place. You can't have it all your own way.'

Jack Ashton had given the starter a lot of trouble at different times, and that official was glad of a chance to rebuke him. He also admired Willie's pluck and patience.

'That little beggar sha'n't be left if I can help it,' he said to himself.

Ashton was in a furious passion. Being the crack jockey, and on the favourite, he thought he ought to do as he pleased.

Target was next to Grey Bird, and Hurley, his jockey, said to Willie,—

'I'm glad you held your own with him. He's a bully. It doesn't matter much to you, because you don't often ride against him, but with us chaps it's different. He's a dangerous beggar. You steer clear of him in the race or he'll like as not drive you over the rails.'

'Thanks,' said Willie. 'It is very good of you to tell me. I'll keep a sharp lookout.'

In another minute the flag was lowered and the lot went off to a very fair start.

CHAPTER XXIX

A GLORIOUS VICTORY

GREY BIRD being a thorough stayer, Willie determined to make the most of his light weight, but the horse was not a quick beginner, and when fairly in his stride half the field was ahead of him.

Tatters, a six-stone chance with a smart lightweight named Jones in the saddle, made the running at a great pace, and so had a lead of many lengths. In a cluster came half-a-dozen more, then Defiance and Target, with Grey Bird on the rails behind them.

At the end of the first mile Tatters still held the lead, and was going so well that some people thought he might retain it to the end.

At this distance Defiance crept up closer with Target, and Willie kept Grey Bird near them.

As they passed the stand Tatters led, the bright orange jacket showing out distinctly.

The favourite was going well, pulling Ashton out of the saddle.

'Willie's on the rails,' said Mr Dauntsey. 'I hope he will not be shut in next time round.'

'It is good going there,' replied Jim, 'and he'll manage to get through, never fear.'

Dr Tom was excited; he had never stood a chance of handling such a lump sum before. Six hundred pounds! It seemed untold wealth to him.

He fixed his eyes on the grey horse and did not see any of the others.

Round the turn and past the road they swept, the orange jacket still in the lead, but the others were gradually drawing nearer. It was a fine race so far, all the runners being well together.

Willie was anxious for an opening, and it came sooner than he anticipated. As they entered the back stretch, round the bend, Target ran wide and bored Defiance out, and this gave Willie a chance.

With marvellous quickness he shot Grey Bird through the opening and went along at a great rate after Tatters. It was a good bit of horsemanship, and recognised as such on the stands.

'That up-country fellow knows how to ride,' said someone at the back of Jim Dennis's party.

'He does indeed. It was a fine move on his part to squeeze through; there was some risk in it. Won't Ashton be mad! He fancies he is the only man can do such things,' replied the gentleman with him.

Jim Dennis was in high spirits and so were his friends.

'He must be as cool as iced water,' said Dr Tom,

'to slip through like that. What a run I am having for my money.'

'And you look like winning it,' said Mr Dauntsey.

The yellow jacket was fast drawing nearer the orange, and a couple of lengths behind Grey Bird came the favourite, and Target, followed by Hova, Baby, Warfare and Walwa, the remainder going well.

Past the top bend they went, and there was a great race for the home turn.

Willie 'hugged' the rails with Grey Bird, and he felt his mount was going better than he had ever done. The horse seemed to feel the excitement of his surroundings and the exultation of being at the head, or nearly so, of a Sydney Cup field.

Grey Bird was not a 'shirker' at any time, but he was surpassing himself on this occasion.

Jack Ashton was very wrath when he saw the grey shoot past him on the rails, and he was now making up for the ground he had lost.

Defiance, despite his big weight, held his own, and as the turn into the straight was reached Ashton sent him along at top speed, and drew alongside Grey Bird as they rounded the bend.

Willie saw the white jacket, and recollected what Hurley, the rider of Target, had said to him.

Jack Ashton closed in upon him until Defiance seemed to bore Grey Bird right on to the rails.

The riders' legs actually touched, but Willie kept his head and sang out,—

'Ride fair. Give me room!'

Jack Ashton made no reply, but tried his best to head Grey Bird.

This was more than he could accomplish, and he set his teeth and vowed vengeance on Willie Dennis.

Neck and neck they raced together, with Tatters a couple of lengths ahead, and Target, Warfare and Walwa close behind, Bung Bung coming fast on the outside.

The crowd on the stand and the lawn was seething with excitement.

The favourite was drawing ahead, the white jacket looked dangerous, and visions of spoiling the book-makers arose in the minds of his backers.

'What a pace!' exclaimed Dr Tom.

'It's a terribly fast race,' answered Jim; 'but Grey Bird is as fleet as the wind.'

'If Willie can hold his own with Jack Ashton he's a young wonder. Ashton has frightened many a lad out of a race. Look there! He'll have Grey Bird over the rails,' said Mr Dauntsey, the latter part of whose remark was caused by Ashton boring on to Jim Dennis's horse.

'That's not fair riding,' said Dr Tom.

'It's foul riding,' said Jim, 'and Ashton ought to be reported for it. I hear he is fond of cutting things fine.'

'The rider of the favourite, I suppose, thinks he may take liberties,' said Dr Tom.

'He'll not take them with my horse,' said Jim.

The excitement was rising every moment; it was evident a desperate struggle was at hand, for Bung Bung and Warfare, not to mention Target and Walwa, were all dangerous. It was an open race three furlongs from home, and the pent-up feelings of the people at last found vent.

At first there was a rumbling sound, which grew and swelled into a sort of roar, and culminated in loud shouts.

'The favourite!' 'The favourite!' 'Defiance wins!' 'Go it, Ashton!' 'Bravo, Jack!'

Then a momentary pause in the din, and again!

'Grey Bird!' 'Grey Bird!' 'Bung Bung has it!' 'Walwa!' 'Walwa!' according to the wishes of the backers of these horses.

Tatters had run himself out, and although Jones managed to hold the lead he knew his mount was beaten.

As Tatters fell back it became necessary for Willie to pull out and pass him, but Jack Ashton did not mean him to do so.

The crack jockey took in the situation at a glance.

Tatters was falling back beaten, and he raced Defiance level with him, completely blocking Grey Bird, unless Willie Dennis risked going round the leaders.

At this critical moment Willie almost slipped out of his saddle, his left stirrup's leather having given way. He swayed to one side, and for a second

thought it was all up with him, but by a vigorous effort he righted himself.

They were all in view of the crowd on the stand, and a terrific cheer went up as he made his clever recovery. It was a marvellous bit of work, and lovers of racing are not slow at recognising skill and pluck.

'Wonderful!' said Dr Tom; 'but it will lose him the race.'

'If Grey Bird wins now it will be the most sensational finish I have ever seen,' said Mr Dauntsey.

Jim Dennis made no reply. He saw what had happened and he felt his hopes of securing Cudgegong were extinguished for some time to come.

His disappointment was, however, mitigated by his son's superb riding, and he felt proud of 'the little chap' and hoped for the best. Tatters fell back beaten and Grey Bird passed him on the outside.

Defiance on the rails was a length or more to the good, and Willie was handicapped by the broken leather. He stuck to his work, and Grey Bird quickly made up the lost ground. Jack Ashton was certain of success now and took matters easily.

He little thought Grey Bird and the 'up-country imp' were coming on the outside at a great rate.

Bung Bung had put in a brilliant run and was close up with Jim Dennis's horse. Target was not beaten, and Hurley was riding him out for a place.

Willie heard the deafening shouts, and so did

Grey Bird, and horse and rider were encouraged by the applause which many affect to despise but secretly rejoice at in their hearts.

Jack Ashton received a shock when he was sure of a win.

He suddenly saw a yellow jacket on his left hand, and then he caught sight of the pink-and-white of Bung Bung's jockey.

Had these horses dropped from the clouds? That country chap too, was he a good rider, a worthy rival after all? He could hardly believe it, but the indisputable evidence of his eyes convinced him. That yellow jacket was not only visible, it was level with him for a moment, and then he had not to look sideways to see it, for it was slightly ahead, and the pink-and-white was level with him.

Seldom had Jack Ashton received such a startler. He rode Defiance for all he was worth, and got every ounce out of the horse. The gallant top weight ran a game as his name indicated he would. Defiance defied defeat until his strength was exhausted. The great horse was giving away 'lumps of weight' to Bung Bung and Grey Bird, and he did his level best to enhance his reputation.

Amidst a tornado of maddening cheers and cries the trio raced neck and neck. The white, the yellow, and the pink, seemed hopelessly mixed together, and they could not be separated.

Jim Dennis held his breath and caught hold of Dr Tom's arm.

Dr Tom emitted a sound somewhat resembling a groan, so intense was his anxiety, and to relieve the tension grasped Mr Dauntsey's arm, until the worthy magistrate winced in spite of the excitement he was under.

So great was the struggle, such a powerful effect had it on the dense mass of people that they had barely enough breath left to shout.

Willie saw the judge's box, he saw the head of Defiance on one side, his red nostrils glowing like coals, his eyes starting out, his neck outstretched, and heard the gallant horse's breath coming in sobs and gasps.

On the other side was the head of Bung Bung, who was equally done up, and whose eyes had a dull, beaten look in them.

He saw the head of Grey Bird was slightly in front of the other two heads, and, by a great effort, he lifted the grey forward and shot him past the post—a winner by a neck; and Bung Bung just beat Defiance by a head for second place.

The scene which followed baffles description.

As Jim Dennis led in the beautiful grey tumultuous cheering rent the air.

'Bravo, young un!' 'Well ridden!' 'He's lost a stirrup!' 'Great riding, by Jove!' 'Hurrah for the little chap!' this last from the excited Dr Tom.

Smiling in triumph, Willie dismounted, unbuckled the saddle-girths and went to weigh in.

The scale *would not go down.*

'Fetch the bridle,' said Willie.

In an agony of suspense Jim Dennis waited for the bridle. He seemed to live weeks in the short space of a minute. As for Willie, he went very pale, but retained his nerve with wonderful coolness.

The bridle was handed to him and the scale turned.

'All right.'

What a welcome sound! The cheers broke out again, and Willie Dennis, Grey Bird and the little party from 'up country' were fairly mobbed.

'I never want such another couple of minutes as I had when the bridle was sent for,' said Jim. 'It seemed like a lifetime.'

'I don't know how I felt,' said Willie. 'I seemed dazed, but when the scale went down I could have yelled for joy.'

Jack Ashton was cut up at his defeat, and it did not improve his temper when Willie remarked as he passed him in the paddock,—

'What about the "up-country imp" now?'

Ashton scowled at him and made no reply.

CHAPTER XXX

IN THE DAYS OF PROSPERITY

'IT is five years since Grey Bird won the Sydney Cup, and I feel all the excitement over again as I look at him,' said Dr Tom, as he admired the handsome grey who was now doing stud duty at Cudgegong.

'You will never ride a better race than that, Willie—never. Don't you wish you had accepted Mr M.'s offer and remained to ride for his stable? Think of the big races he has won, and you would have ridden all those winners. What a triumph that would have been!'

'I am far happier here,' said Willie Dennis. 'My father has been so kind to me ever since I was a little chap that it would have been selfish on my part to leave him in his loneliness. It was no sacrifice, I assure you, Dr Tom, because I love station life.'

'You are a good lad, and your father may well be proud of you. I expect you will be married one of these days,' said Dr Tom.

'No prospects of it yet,' said Willie, laughing; 'and I am quite contented.'

'I must look round for a suitable mate,' said Dr Tom. 'It is not good for man to live alone.'

'You are a standing refutation of that saying,' replied Willie. 'It is different with me. I was cut out for an old bachelor.'

Cudgegong and Wanabeen were now the property of Jim Dennis, and he was a prosperous man. He paid down twelve thousand pounds, after settling day, over Grey Bird's Cup, to Chris Shaw, and the whole of the purchase money was handed over in three years.

Chris Shaw was as glad to handle the money and be rid of the station as Jim Dennis was to buy it, so they were mutually satisfied. Only one bad season had troubled them, and during that time Jim Dennis lost heavily, but quickly recouped himself when better days dawned.

Sergeant Doonan married Sal, and Jim Dennis had to look out for another housekeeper.

He searched in vain for some time, until at last he was well-nigh in despair of securing a suitable person. About this time he visited Barragong, and again met Molly Corbold at Adye Dauntsey's house.

The magistrate's wife died suddenly and she came to keep house for her cousin.

Molly Corbold's father had met with many severe reverses in business in Sydney, and she was glad to accept such a position as Adye Dauntsey offered her in order to relieve him. She admired Jim

Dennis and was not afraid to show it, and he was not insensible to her charms and many good qualities, but considered she was 'a cut above him,' as he put it.

Mr Dauntsey saw how matters were drifting and was not ill-pleased. He knew Jim Dennis's worth, and also that he was a man of substance and well calculated to make a woman like Molly Corbold happy.

'Molly,' he said to her one day, when Jim Dennis had returned to Wanabeen. 'I think Dennis admires you. Do you like him?'

'Yes, I like him very much,' she replied openly. 'He is a very genuine man.'

'Precisely, that exactly describes him,' said her cousin. 'He is well off, and, although not well educated, he may be said to be one of Nature's best make. He is coming again next week.'

'Oh,' she replied, 'I shall be very pleased to see him.'

Jim Dennis came and tried his chance, and Molly Corbold accepted him as her husband, and was thankful she had secured such a good match.

They were married, and at the time of which we read had been living happily together for three years at Cudgegong. Willie Dennis was very fond of his father's wife, and they were a united family.

Jim Dennis found it very different living at Cudgegong, with such a clever wife as Molly, to the deserted life he spent at Wanabeen.

He told her the history of his past life, omitting no details, and she pitied him for all he had suffered.

Molly Dennis was as popular as her husband at Swamp Creek, which had developed into quite an important township owing to the discovery of gold in the vicinity.

The population had increased by leaps and bounds, until Dr Tom found he had quite as much work on his hands as he could manage, and had serious thoughts of obtaining the services of an assistant from Sydney.

Sergeant Doonan's position was no sinecure, and he had his headquarters at Swamp Creek. The rough element, attracted by the rush for gold, abounded, but he kept them in order with a firm hand, and Swamp Creek was grateful to him.

The races there were the most important out West, and the valuable prizes given attracted owners from far distant parts.

It was at such races as these Willie Dennis often rode his father's horses with signal success, but he refused to ride for anyone else, although offered large sums to do so. Jim Dennis remonstrated with him, but Willie stood firm, and his father allowed him to have his own way.

The Cudgegong stud was fast becoming famous, and breeders from many parts of New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland visited the station and made extensive purchases.

They were surprised to find in Molly Dennis a well-

educated, refined woman, and wondered how she managed to exist in such a lonely part.

Molly Dennis was not lonely; she was very happy. Her husband was kind and devoted to her, and she did all in her power to please him. They generally had someone staying with them, and constant visitors came from Swamp Creek and Barragong. Altogether it was a 'jolly life,' Molly said, and she meant it.

She was an excellent horsewoman, and had long gallops over the big paddocks with Willie Dennis.

Adye Dauntsey generally spent the week-end with them, and on the occasion of these visits Dr Tom would drop in for a chat.

Dr Tom had never been so prosperous before, and he was quite accustomed to having his fees paid, a thing he had never dreamt of even in his most sanguine moments.

He had built a new house at Swamp Creek, and his buggy and pair was highly presentable.

Altogether Dr Tom was somewhat of a reformed character, but he was still the same good-natured, even-tempered, kind-hearted man who had answered Jim Dennis's call for help when Willie lay at death's door.

No man was more beloved than the doctor, and no trouble was too great, he thought, to deserve the kindness of his many friends. Molly Dennis was his favourite, and he amused her for hours with his quaint tales of ship life and his early struggles at Swamp

Creek. He still had a mania for poetry, and Molly Dennis was his theme, 'his inspiration,' he said.

'I declare I am quite jealous of you, doctor,' said Jim. 'I wish you would teach me to write poetry so that I might have a chance of winning back Molly's affections.'

'Poetry is not taught,' said Dr Tom, grandly. 'It is born in men. It is a genius, a gift from the gods.'

'You don't say so?' replied Jim. 'Then you are a spoilt child of the gods.'

'Very much spoilt,' said Dr Tom, laughing. 'In order to calm your jealous suspicions I will write my next poem upon your many admirable qualities.'

'Don't; please spare me that,' said Jim. 'I could not stand it. Anything but that, doctor. Have some mercy upon me.'

'Jim, you are too severe upon him,' said Molly. 'I am sure some of Dr Tom's poetry is beautiful; the sentiment is charming.'

'I am amply repaid,' said the doctor. 'Such praise from so fair a lady is a grand recompense for hours of toil.'

They all laughed merrily, and Dr Tom vowed he would do something brilliant in the future.

One calm, peaceful night Jim Dennis sat on the broad verandah at Cudgegong, and, looking across the green lands before him, thought over the past and contrasted it with the present.

As far as his eyes could see he owned the land, it was his to hold for ever, until he died.

After all, fortune had favoured him, and Providence, having chastened him, was now amply recompensing him for his early sufferings.

He had a loving wife, a dutiful son; what more could he want?

He thought of the old days at Wanabeen; of the time when, well-nigh broken-hearted, he learned Willie's mother, his wife, had deserted them. It caused a passing sadness in the midst of his happiness. Then he recalled how the sinning woman came back to die, and he clenched his hands as he thought of Rodney Shaw and his villanies.

Of the fight at Barker's Creek he had a vivid recollection, and his eyes glistened as he thought of the hand to hand conflict with Dalton's gang.

A light touch on his shoulder, and Molly said in a low voice,—

'Dreaming of the past, Jim? Do not recall it; think of the present—and me.'

She nestled at his feet and laid her head on his knee. He stroked her hair, and said,—

'I was thinking of the past, Molly, but it is a very far-off memory. With you near me all the black days vanish and there is nothing but light and joy and peace. I little thought such happiness as this would ever be mine.'

'Then you are contented?'

'Yes; no man could be more so, and I owe it all to you,' he said.

The trials and troubles of Jim Dennis's earlier days were past, and the autumn of his life was full of peace and contentment.

THE END

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